

CATCHING THE “WILD NOTE”:  
LISTENING, LEARNING, AND CONNOISSEURSHIP IN OLD-TIME MUSIC

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## **ABSTRACT**

Joseph Edward Decosimo: Catching the “Wild Note”:  
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(Under the direction of Glenn Hinson)

As we approach the century mark for audio recording projects that began documenting traditional music forms in the southern U.S., it is worth interrogating the profound ways that old commercial and field recordings shape contemporary performance practices and understandings of these genres, especially as copies of older recordings circulate widely and unexpectedly and accumulate new meanings. This project examines the ways that sound recordings and technologies mediate contemporary performance practices, aesthetics, and social relationships in the context of Old-time music, especially among Old-time practitioners in East Tennessee, a site long associated with the genre. An ethnography of listening, learning, and performance practices among expert Old-time musicians, this dissertation brings conversations about the splitting and circulation of sounds from their sources to bear on long-standing concerns about modes of transmission of traditional and local knowledge. Thinking about the transmission of traditional music as a process thoroughly imbricated with sound technologies yields new questions, stories, and understandings about Old-time music making and the study of expressive culture.

This project traces a circulatory flow that runs from Old-time’s emergence as commercial and field recordings into the learning, listening, and performing bodies of contemporary musicians and, then, back into the realm of recorded sound as contemporary experts make new recordings. Based on the author’s experience as a performer/researcher, and on fifteen years of

fieldwork with expert musicians around Chattanooga, Tennessee, and beyond, this project reveals the intensely creative processes of emulation that lead to masterful performances on fiddle and banjo, the intimate relationships that form between players and between listener/learners and sound recordings, and emergent forms of connoisseurship. As this project foregrounds and interrogates the role of sound technologies in mediating and sustaining local forms of expressive culture, it invites researchers to consider carefully the entangled relationships between technologies, aesthetics, and masterful performances in contemporary traditional art forms. Rather than dismissing artistic projects that draw on recordings as less *authentic* than projects built around face-to-face learning, this project invites researchers to recognize the creative labor and social relationships that form as mediated repertoires and styles return to embodied performances.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: LEARNING TO LISTEN AND LISTENING TO LEARN.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction.....	1
What is Old-time? .....	11
Guiding Concerns and Questions.....	19
Method and Approach.....	23
The Site: Chattanooga, Tennessee .....	26
The Sociality of Listening in Old-time .....	31
Connoisseurs of Old Recordings .....	32
Activities of Connoisseurship: Listening, Learning, and Emulating.....	33
The Aesthetics of Connoisseurship: Oldness, Offness, and Liveness as On-ness.....	38
Overview.....	40
<b>CHAPTER 2: MEDIATING OLDNESS: OLD FIDDLES, OLD FIDDLERS, OLD FIDDLING IN 1920S CHATTANOOGA.....</b>	<b>46</b>
Introduction.....	46
Part I: Old Fiddling in the Air and in the Paper .....	50
Part II: Old Fiddling in the Body .....	63
Part III: Old Fiddling on the Stage.....	71
Conclusion .....	76

**CHAPTER 3 NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR OLDNESS: LISTENING, PARTICIPATING,  
AND MAKING OLD-TIME MUSIC LIVE IN CHATTANOOGA, 1995-2017..... 80**

Oldness Revisited and New Possibilities..... 80

Introduction..... 82

Part I: The Mountain Opry, Walden’s Ridge 1995-2001 ..... 89

Part II: Local Sounds, Energies, and Affects..... 103

Part III: The Great Southern Fiddlers’ Convention ..... 107

Conclusion ..... 123

**CHAPTER 4: WINDING AND UNWINDING THE CLOCK:  
EMULATING, OSCARIZING, AND GROOVING AS RELATING..... 126**

Winding up..... 131

Part I: A Biography of Social Relations ..... 135

Part II: Process (or a Biography of a Groove) ..... 149

Winding Down..... 161

**CHAPTER 5: “BAD NOTES” AS GOOD INTONATION:  
CULTIVATING A CONNOISSEURSHIP OF OFFNESS AS ON-NESS ..... 165**

Introducing the Bad Note..... 165

Introduction..... 166

Rounding off the “Sharp Edges”: Anxieties about Festivalizing..... 171

A History of Bad Notes..... 181

Getting Bad Notes under the Finger ..... 189

Constructing Lineages of Pitch: Seeking Rules of Offness and Bad Notes ..... 192

Interrogating the Bad Note..... 196

Conclusion: “Like Ketchup on a Taco” ..... 200



<b>CHAPTER 6: SO LIVE IT BLEEDS: MUSIC MEDIATED AS INTIMATE AND LIVE IN CONTEMPORARY OLD-TIME .....</b>	<b>205</b>
Introduction.....	205
A Brief History of Recording Live and Field Recording in Old-time .....	210
Studio 808a: Intimacy, The Outdoor Festival Sound, and Bleed as Liveness .....	216
Bleed As a Sign of Life: Tracking, Mixing, and Editing for Closeness and Liveness .....	226
“It’s Right Accurate”: Creating Liveness and Intimacy in East Tennessee.....	229
Space, Sound, and Intimacy .....	233
Field Recordings, Unrehearsed Performances, and the Liveness of First Takes .....	240
Conclusion: .....	247
<b>CHAPTER 7: “FILLING IN THE GAPS” .....</b>	<b>250</b>
Auditory Time Travel .....	250
Lingering Questions.....	252
Mediating the Self as Old .....	253
A Tag .....	257
<b>APPENDIX 1: LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>259</b>
<b>SOURCES OF INSPIRATION (CITED AND OTHERWISE) .....</b>	<b>280</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Clyde Davenport and Tiny .....	2
Figure 2: The "Salyer Slayer" Jam, Clifftop, West Virginia .....	8
Figure 3: Columbia Records advertisement.....	56
Figure 4: Jess Young and his fiddle "Old Rat" .....	64
Figure 5: the front of the Mountain Opry, Walden, Tennessee .....	90
Figure 6: Backstage at the Mountain Opry .....	91
Figure 7: The Mountain Opry stage.....	91
Figure 8: Banjo player Don Sarrell's "No Lookin' Back" (1998) album j-card .....	98
Figure 9: Don Sarrell, Joseph Decosimo, Tom Adkins at the Mountain Opry.....	103
Figure 10: Don Sarrell, Joseph Decosimo, Tom Adkins at the Mountain Opry.....	103
Figure 11: Matt Downer at the Great Southern Fiddler's Convention .....	107
Figure 12: Daniel Rothwell accompanies Trenton Carruthers .....	117
Figure 13: Charles Higgins in his orchard, Whitwell, Tennessee.....	130
Figure 14: Charles Higgins in his orchard, Whitwell, Tennessee.....	130
Figure 15: Charles Higgins in his orchard, Whitwell, Tennessee.....	130
Figure 16: Charles Higgins on guitar and Oscar Overturf fiddling .....	139
Figure 17: Charles Higgins accompanying fiddler Clint Kilgore.....	140
Figure 18: Bob Townsend at the "Bluegrass Memorial," Dunlap, Tennessee, .....	143
Figure 19: Charles Higgins holds Oscar Overturf's fiddle, Whitwell, Tennessee .....	164
Figure 20: Charles Higgins at the Great Southern Fiddlers Convention .....	164
Figure 21: "Fiddlin' Bill Hensley, mountain fiddler, Asheville, North Carolina" .....	186
Figure 22: David Parker Bennett's transcription of Bill Hensley's "Georgia Horseshoe" .....	187

Figure 23: Joe Dejarnette in front of Studio 808a, Floyd, Virginia..... 216

Figure 24: Joe Dejarnette in the control room, Studio 808a, Floyd, Virginia ..... 223

Figure 25: Charlie McCarroll and dog at the Rocky Top General Store,  
Harriman, Tennessee..... 249

## Chapter 1: Learning to Listen and Listening to Learn

### Introduction

Old-time music grooves and drives. It transports players. It moves dancers.

Snatched out of the air and pinned on a reel of tape, it slips from the reel into an ear. It travels from the ear to the hand, from the hand to the string, from the string back into the world—again. Its listeners learn to listen, and its learners listen to learn.

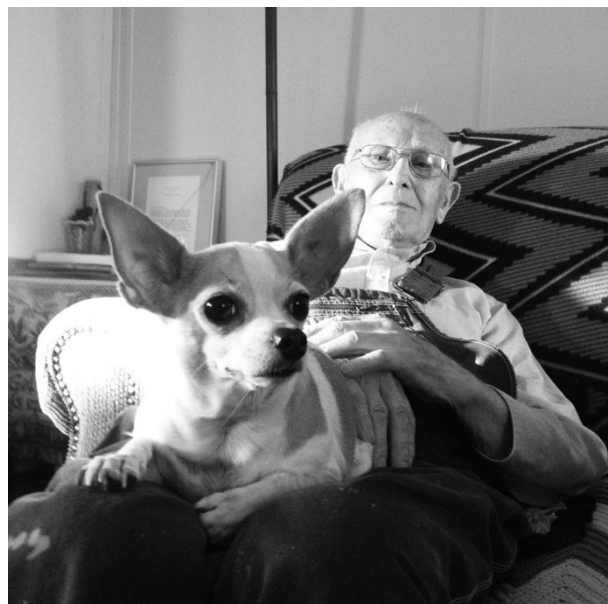
Consider the limits and possibilities of this changing music:

### Scene 1:

I visited 96 year old master Old-time fiddler and banjo player Clyde Davenport at his home in Monticello, Kentucky, in the fall of 2017. I played a banjo tune for him that I had worked up from an old field recording of his playing. I thought I had really captured his sound. When I finished playing, he leaned back into the couch, smiling a sly smile, and shaking his head “no.” He slowly said, “That stinks.” So it goes. The first time I met him around 2002, he told me that he didn’t know how to play the fiddle. I was standing on his front porch, and as he opened the door, he looked curiously at the fiddle and banjo cases in my hands. Inside, I could see a couple of fiddles leaning on the couch. We stood on the porch for nearly ten minutes as he continued to insist that he didn’t know how to fiddle. Mr. Davenport is a notorious prankster, and I was fresh blood. I felt like a chump.

Of course, I knew he *did* play the fiddle. Clyde Davenport is a master Old-time fiddler who was born in the mountains of Wayne County, Kentucky, in 1921. He plays his father Will’s fiddle pieces. They are exquisite, archaic, old fiddle tunes made for listening and dancing. He

traces many of his pieces to the 19th century repertoires of his father's father, Francis Marion Davenport, and a neighbor, Will Phipps, who was born in 1829 and was, according to local legend, buried with his fiddle. Through the efforts of regional folklorists and ethnomusicologists, Clyde had received a National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship 1992; a handful of other awards additionally celebrated his music making as heritage or a folk art. The Old-time music niche label, County Records, released an LP of his music in 1986; those recordings recently circulated as downloadable MP3s on music blogs focused on digitizing cool, old, out-of-print vinyl (Novak 2011). Ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon had released a cassette of, and built an early website dedicated to, Clyde's music. By some weird fluke of circulation and Hollywood appropriation, a field recording of his drony, solo fiddle piece "Getting up the Stairs," learned from Will Phipps's repertoire and tuned in a special tuning, had even been featured in the 1991 Michael J. Fox flop "Doc Hollywood" (Feld 1996).<sup>1</sup> I knew Clyde's resume



*Figure 1 (above): Clyde Davenport and Tiny, Jamestown, Tennessee, 13 November 13, 2013, (photograph by the author)*

and persisted: "What's that wooden thing on the couch over there? That sure does look like a fiddle."

Clyde eventually caved in, and we made our way inside. He was no stranger to visitors with their instruments and recording devices, as his house had long been a site of pilgrimage for the Old-time musicians who had become interested in his music from the 1970s through the

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<sup>1</sup> Clyde Davenport received royalties because his playing partner and friend, folklorist Bobby Fulcher, happened to see the film, heard Clyde's fiddling, and hounded Warner Brothers for the royalties.

1990s. He rattled off a list of folks who had come to try to learn a little bit of his Old-time music. They had come from all over the U.S., Canada, and Europe. He'd even had a visitor from Japan. I was just one of many musicians who became captivated by his graceful fiddling and repertoire.

The first visit was everything I had hoped for. Clyde tried to teach me a relatively simple fiddle tune with the innocuous name, "Prettiest Little Girl in the County." I got lost watching, listening, and trying to replicate. Even though his long-suffering wife Lorene had endured my false starts, bad bowing, and missed notes for hours on end, she still insisted that I join them for supper—bread, beans, potatoes, onions, a glass of milk. Eventually, I moved back home to Tennessee about two hours from Clyde and Lorene, and I kept returning, bringing the Marantz tape recorder my father bought me in high school when I became obsessed with Old-time fiddle and banjo and started trying to learn from the handful of older players in the area. I filled up countless cassette tapes with the music Clyde played for me, the stories he told, and the sounds of his house.

When I returned to see him every month or so after assiduously working over the pieces I had captured on my cassette tapes, I'd bring some groceries and my crude versions of "Five Miles from Town" or the spooky, lonesome sounding "Jenny in the Cotton Patch." Getting his music right was (and is) anything but easy, and Clyde was not one to dole out unmerited praise. He'd listen and watch me and mull over the fact that here I was with my college degree coming to learn from him. "I'll *try* to set you straight," he'd tell me, as he lifted his instrument, bracing it just below his left collar bone. He'd attempt to correct the direction and feel of my bow—lighter and smoother, no jerking allowed, "you're not trying to saw the fiddle in two." They don't call him "Clyde the Glide" for no reason.

There was the time I tried to learn his piece “Boating up Sandy,” which ventures higher up the fingerboard than most Old-time tunes that hang out comfortably down in first position. I had been sitting knee to knee with him for a few days, trying my hardest to get the motions and the sound to align (but feeling fried). I tried to get this double-stop (index and ring fingers holding down two different strings) slide that he executes. I managed something, but it sounded swooping, grand, and goofy, like a kid blowing two slide whistles at once. Nope. “Pick your hand up and set it up there,” he explained and demonstrated, barely lifting his fingers off the strings, tilting his wrist to move them up the string, lowering the fingers gently back on the ebony fingerboard and strings just millimeters below the note. He then coaxed them up to the desired pitch, milking an incredibly smoky, bluesy sound out of his instrument. I tried it again and made an abrupt honking sound about as pleasant and subtle as those two-tone European sirens. I realized that accomplishing this subtle motion would require years of work.

“I never tried to learn a tune in my life,” he’d reminded me on most visits. He’d tell me about how, when he was a young man, he used to hear “old man blind Dick Burnett” and his music partner Leonard Rutherford making music on the courthouse steps in Monticello. Burnett and Rutherford have become patron saints for Old-time music aficionados who discovered their 1920s’ 78s reissued on Harry Smith’s canonical *Anthology of American Folk Music* and on other LP anthologies of the 1970s. Rutherford’s slippery and silky fiddling, shaped by the glassy playing of a black fiddler named Cuje Bertram, became *the* sound for fiddlers in Clyde’s community around Wayne County, Kentucky. He told me about how he absorbed Rutherford’s style without ever trying to learn it.

I, on the other hand, had to work to learn Clyde’s music, returning over the years for inspiration and correction. During summer visits, we’d slip outside and take a look at the garden,

filled with rows of potatoes in the sandy Cumberland Plateau soil. On warm, muggy summer nights, we'd sit on the side porch and play music while moths and nighttime insects congregated around the porchlight. Every now and then, Lorene, with a can of Raid in hand, would wage war against them. I'd hold my breath until the cloud of Raid dissipated. We survived it, but the moths didn't. After the tunes had run their course, he'd see me off the porch, telling me he was proud to have had me come visit. These were lessons in technique, repertoire, and humility.

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## **Scene 2**

In 1941, Grover Salyer bought a Wilcox-Gay disc cutter in Cincinnati. He hoped to take it with him and record his father John Salyer's music on visits back home to Magoffin County, Kentucky. It would be a tricky prospect: his father, who was an exceptional fiddler in a region filled with exceptional fiddlers, had been offered an opportunity to record before, but refused the A&R men's (a commercial record label's artist and repertoire scouts) offer. The way his family tells it, John Salyer was out in a field with his mule hitched up when the men approached him about his music. They talked. Believing that the compensation was unfair, he declared to his mule Kate: "Get up, Kate, we can make more money plowing than we can playing the fiddle" (Green 1997). However, after his son brought home a disc cutter, John Salyer eventually relented and allowed his son to record him playing some 90 pieces over the next few years. The family guarded these recordings for years, until they eventually allowed a young fiddler named Bruce Green to hear the recordings. However, they wouldn't allow him to make copies. Sometime in the 1980s, the recordings of John Salyer made their way into Berea College's archive, from whence copies began to leak. Eventually, they were released on cassettes. Now, they are posted



on the Digital Library of Appalachia, available to the world. This old music that in the 1990s was rare and new now circulates widely.

Fast forward to 2015. Over three thousand musicians from around the country and abroad have gathered for the Appalachian String Band Festival (a.k.a. Clifftop) at a state park on a mountaintop in West Virginia to jam, dance, party, and spend a week immersed in all things Old-time (see Wood 2015 and Wooley 2003 for more detailed discussions of the event). It's the last evening of the festival and the weather is beautiful; it's the kind of crisp, dry weather that's not completely out of the realm of possibility in the mountains during early August. There's enough daylight left that a green tint filters through the tree canopy. It's the soft, slanted light of late summer. Campsites are scattered all along the gravel loops and lanes that wind through the park, and in most campsites, there are jams set up under various kinds of tarps. These typically consist of a fiddler or two, a banjo player, a guitar or two, and maybe a bass. The musicians sit in tight circles—close enough that players have to be aware of where a bow tip might end up. At one campsite, there's a person stepping time on a little piece of plywood. This is mostly dance music—or at least it *was* mostly dance music. These days these old tunes are often played in a quest to groove (see Woolf 1990). At least that is what's been happening here for the last seven days, as groups gather and reconfigure. The smell of dinner preparations wafts through the air, mixing with the cigarette smoke and occasional skunky, pungent puffs of weed. But the sounds are where it's at. They're overwhelming—the crunch of gravel and laughter as groups of friends wind through the lanes; the clink of ice in a cocktail shaker in a more plush, sophisticated campsite; the trebly sputter and the accompanying metallic smell of two-cycle engine exhaust as the maintenance crew cruises by in some kind of off-roading golf cart.

Then there's the sounds of the music. Standing in the middle of the road, it can sound like the disorganized throb and pulse of summer insects at full bore. Though it waxes and wanes, music can be heard from around lunchtime until sunrise. The sounds of sessions overlap. As you move toward one, it comes into focus. The bellowy and tinkly sound of the Cajun tent and the whoops of the campsite of folks from Tennessee and Georgia just beyond fade out and a new sound coalesces.

Here's the Salyer Slayer jam that Aaron, A.J., and Sony have organized. As expert listeners and performers, they have invested considerable energy into listening and learning John Salyer's music as represented in his son Grover's field recordings. The jam is dedicated to playing through the entire recorded repertoire of John Salyer (that same fellow who reluctantly allowed his son to record him in the early 1940s). While many of the jams are exclusive, this one is set up right in the middle of the road. It's open to any player who knows or wants to play some of Salyer's repertoire. A white dry erase board (rescued from a dumpster behind a seafood restaurant) leans against a car, with "SALYER SLAYER JAM" scrawled across its front. On a chair in the middle of the circle is a large piece of posterboard on which someone has meticulously written a checklist in blue permanent marker of every tune Salyer recorded. After each tune, they check it off and move on to the next. An iPhone rests on the checklist just in case they need an MP3 of the old recording to prompt them on how a particular piece goes. Aaron, one of the organizers, wears a white t-shirt with the words "SALYER SLAYER" carefully written in the red, jagged metalhead font instantly recognizable to Slayer fans across the chest.

At this particular moment, they are playing Salyer's "Fire on the Mountain." Karen from San Francisco, A.J. and Rina from Minneapolis, Doug from Berlin, Sonya from Rhode Island, and Aaron from Charlottesville are fiddling. There's a banjo player from Connecticut, a

mandolin player from North Carolina, a guitar player from Floyd, Virginia, and others, ranging in age from their early twenties to their mid-60s. A few minutes into the tune, a short, pony-tailed man with a well-groomed beard walks up and leans against a tree, a look of bemusement playing across his face. It's Jerry Smith. His brother, Paul David Smith, was one of the last living older masters of Eastern Kentucky fiddle and banjo music. Jerry and Paul David were traveling companions until Paul David passed away a couple of years ago. Jerry loved the music, and would record whatever sessions his brother got into when they'd attend fiddlers' conventions or when Paul David was invited to be guest master artist at a music camp. So here's Jerry, an eastern Kentucky native who's intimately familiar with the region's music, listening to these musicians from all over play music from his home. It's not the first time this has happened, and I can't imagine he'd keep returning if it bothered him. Jerry still comes to festivals to visit with friends and hear the music.



*Figure 2 (above): The "Salyer Slayer" Jam, Clifftop, West Virginia. 31 July 2015. (photo by the author)*

As the tune wraps up, the players start chatting. Karen and A.J. talk about how that piece is open to interpretation. There's discussion about how Salyer used his bow. With a Sharpie marker in hand, Sonya leans down to the list of tunes, categorized by fiddle tuning and keys, and checks off "Fire on the Mountain." Discussion follows: which one should they do next. This is the easy part. It gets trickier later in the night when they drunkenly stumble into the dustier, more obscure corners of John Salyer's recorded repertoire. It takes them the better part of a day—and several consultations with the iPhone—to work through the repertoire. On the ride home, Sonya and Aaron realize that they missed a tune.

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In Old-time, things overlap. A recorded past, crystallized in a series of 1920s and early 1930s commercial recordings and nearly a century's worth of field and home recordings, overlaps with the present, creating both the inspiration for and the measure of contemporary renderings of those recordings. Older performance practices, learned from visits with players like Clyde Davenport, overlap with performance practices cultivated through careful listening, jamming, high school orchestra, and, increasingly, conservatory training. Social worlds also overlap. In the 1920s, the music making that came to be racialized, labeled, and commodified as "Old-time" provided a space in which black and white musicians might trade licks, even if the flow was uneven. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and especially in the 1970s, urban outsider musicians overlapped with local insider music makers in the South, creating a wild mingling of class and background. Likewise, younger local insider musicians overlapped with older local insider musicians.

In a jam, the sounds of a fiddle, banjo, guitar, and whatever other instruments are at hand overlap, thickening the music up, creating something dense, something that pushes and pulls

against itself. The sound of a flatfoot dancer or the calls of square dance caller overlap with the music as bodies move in motion. At the fiddlers' convention, the sound of one session—the music, the talk, the laughter—overlaps the sound of others, wrapping the space in a dense, gauzy hum, signaling the vibrancy of this music.

Relationships, aesthetics, musical learning, sound technologies, place, and genealogies of style overlap as expert contemporary Old-time musicians labor over older sounds and styles, incorporating them into their performing bodies and into the relationships that form around the music. As opportunities to connect with players like Clyde Davenport or Paul David Smith dwindle, a sense of loss ripples through the overlapping Old-time scenes. Sound recordings, a longtime source of learning and creative inspiration, now become a privileged site of musical knowledge.

I approach Old-time as a site of overlapping excess. The practices of listening and learning that allow players to make this music are my focus, as I seek to understand how expert Old-time musicians come to perform music that other musicians recognize as masterful.

As Old-time music circulates widely and unexpectedly in the form of recordings and embodied performances, the clearly understood artistic authority has shifted out of the hands of older masters, and new pathways to mastery have emerged. In the absence of face-to-face learning relationships with masters, old recordings have become a critical site of knowledge, and the mastery of those recordings becomes a key pathway through which musicians perform their expertise. I ask what kinds of creative and expressive possibilities and limits present themselves in a musical world like this one, where modes of transmission have shifted from old master / student relationships, and sound recordings / listening have become a primary and preferred way

of knowing music.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on players whose musical practice is marked by a listening culture of connoisseurship, I reveal the listening and learning processes that allow expert players to perform authoritative renditions of Old-time music and the intimate relationships to fellow musicians and sound recordings that form along the way.

### **What is Old-time?**

I understand the genre of Old-time as embodied musical practice, as stories, and as repertoires and aesthetic dispositions that circulate unexpectedly through live performances and in sound recordings (and copies of those recordings). For our purposes, I map out the contours of what people are doing and have done with the music, especially in relation to transmission, learning, and sound recordings. But let's begin with a more expected approach to understanding Old-time as a genre.<sup>3</sup> A name that originated in the 1920s as a growing commercial recording industry sought to expand markets in the American South, "Old-time" designated the commodified recordings of a social music that was played for square dances, gatherings, and community entertainment and personal pleasure in the South during the early 20th century and back into the 19th century. Record companies marketed Old-time music as a white music; the music, repertoire, and styles, however, were not solely white until they were marketed as such (Miller 2010, Russell 1970). Fiddles and banjos played a key role in the music, and players approached these instruments with creativity and a range of techniques. Guitars, mandolins, cellos, pump organs, pianos, harmonicas, ukuleles, and basses could also be found in the string

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<sup>2</sup> This guiding question has bearing on other American genres that have been shaped by folkloric discourses of revival, authenticity, and old masters, and that engage in similar projects of reauralization (e.g., blues, bluegrass, Cajun, Irish, klezmer, etc.). It also extends to artistic practices that have moved from relational forms of learning to technologically mediated ones.

<sup>3</sup> Please see the Literature Review in the Appendix, where I offer a more thorough overview of scholarly work on Old-time Music and other literature relevant to this dissertation.

bands of 1920s. Older fiddle tunes, banjo pieces, and songs with lyrics, including ballads, were part of the repertoire. The repertoire also included “common stock” material, songs like John Henry and Stagolee, shared across racial lines (Russell 1970: 31). The Old-time repertoire of the 1920s included local fiddle and banjo pieces and songs about regional events. It also included the latest Tin Pan Alley pieces, numbers gleaned from pop recordings, sacred music, and minstrel and vaudeville pieces. The repertoire and styles were eclectic and, even if the music was marketed as old and white, its players played music that appealed to them, regardless of whether it was brand new or old or from black or white repertoires.

It’s these recordings and artists that circulate into the flow of Old-time. After the so-called “golden era” of the 1920s and early ‘30s, Old-time recordings, the music and its players did not disappear or die.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have described and explored a 1970s’ and 1980s’ Old-time revival in which outsider musicians embraced regional repertoires and styles (Rosenberg 1993, Scully 2008, Wooley 2003, Woolf 1990). They’ve also recognized the limits of the revival model (Ruchala 2011, Wood 2015). Researching Surry County, North Carolina, a historic focal point of revivalist attention, James Ruchala suggests the term “postrevival” for scenes “that are neither wholly traditional and not well described as a revival” (2011: 43). My research leads me to places that I believe aren’t accurately described by the revival or postrevival models.

Regardless of scholarly conceptual models, communities and families throughout the Southern U.S. have sustained, expanded, and creatively reimagined this music, rendering it meaningful and pleasurable into the present. This point is critical to my project. To give a sense of how Old-time has been understood, I revisit and amend a story that others have capably told, focusing on interplays between circulation, learning, and sound technologies. This is a story about the Old-

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<sup>4</sup> Many contemporary players have retrospectively applied this “golden era” designation to the period in the 1920s and early 1930s, when many of the canonical Old-time recordings were made.

time music revival that began in the late 1950s, a product of and reaction to the larger mid-century folk revival boom. Academics have spilled considerable ink describing and theorizing revivals like these, and they've raised valid questions about authenticity, tradition, and the practice of public sector folklore and ethnomusicology in this context (Allen 2010, Bealle 2005, Cantwell 1996, Livingston 1999, Rosenberg 1993, Ruchala 2011, Slobin 1983, Tilton 2012). However, as I revisit this story, I wish for my reader to remember that there in the background, in places like Chattanooga, Tennessee, or nearby Whitwell, there were musicians (off the revival radar) sustaining and reimagining local music practices. But first I will trace the more audible and studied streams of the genre.

The story of the Old-time revival (as a revivalist or participant in the music might tell it) typically goes something like the following. Sometime during the 1970s, an urban (often northern) outsider heads South to a rural fiddlers' convention like Union Grove in North Carolina or Galax in Virginia. Frustrated with the vapidness of mainstream American culture and consumerism, they are smitten by the sounds they hear at this festival and intrigued by the older players. They strike up acquaintances with these older players and, perhaps, begin to visit them at their homes, where they make tape recordings of their visits. Some begin to study the music in earnest, apprenticing themselves to these masters. An even smaller slice of folks move into the communities to learn the music and drink the water. They develop relationships with these older players. Visits and face-to-face learning relationships with old masters were the preferred way to learn this music. After all, these repertoires weren't written down.

A secondary but vital source of musical knowledge was sound recordings, which have fueled and inspired the various scenes that make up Old-time. Because Old-time music is listened to both for pleasure and as potential learning material, record labels and their releases



have been central to the creation of an Old-time canon, shaping technique and repertoire during (and after) that revival moment.<sup>5</sup> Most notably, Dave Freeman's label County Records, with its newsletters and vinyl (and eventual CD) reissues of 1920s Old-time 78s, and its albums featuring older master players whom the revivalists revered, played a profound role in canon formation and in shaping repertoires, techniques, and players' sense of the music's origins. In the 1970s and 80s, players awaited County's reissues, gobbling up the new, old music and incorporating it into their playing.

Along the way, field recordings, made by players during visits with older masters (or copied from archival recordings made by folklorists), began to circulate alongside these old commercial recordings. As cassette tape technology became affordable and readily available, Old-time players began creating, curating, and trading mix tapes of Old-time music pulled from old commercial and field recordings. Repertoires and styles circulated further afield within this lively cassette trading culture (Bealle 2005). Besides songs, which for unknown reasons seem to be of secondary importance to many musicians in the genre, recordings of fiddle tunes were *the* unit of trade in this economy. Ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon notes that within this community, "tunes are musicians' currency" (2001:11). Much of Old-time music making orbits around the focal point of fiddle tunes. These are the units of expressivity. Fiddle tunes, simply called "tunes" by Old-time players, are repetitive pieces typically consisting of a higher pitched melodic line and a responding lower pitched part. Musicians listen and learn tunes from old recordings and share them at jams and festivals. A tune provides the musical space in which musicians can play together and groove. A tune is made to be repeated until musicians or dancers get their fill—something that could happen in a matter of minutes or over a half hour.

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<sup>5</sup> Please see the Literature Review in the Appendix for a discussion of record labels that have presented Old-time music over the years.

Preferences for particular types and vintages of tunes (e.g., complex rags, haunting tunes from Eastern Kentucky field recordings, wild tunes from 1920s commercial recordings of North Georgia string bands, hard-driving tunes from 1970s transitional bluegrass/Old-time bands from the Round Peak Region along the North Carolina and Virginia border) organize players, creating smaller communities of taste within the larger world of Old-time.

Expert players become aficionados of smaller repertoires of tunes, even as they may play a broader range of tunes. In the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, expert players would seek to be the first to discover and record arcane tunes learned from obscure field recordings, thus distinguishing their repertoires from those of their peers. While many expert players believe that the old stuff is the good stuff, and prefer to listen primarily to older recordings, bands and performers continue to produce and sell physical albums on CDs and, among the hipper set, on vinyl. A very small handful of Old-time bands and players tour professionally, selling their recordings at festivals, house concerts, and venues friendly to traditional music. These recordings shape contemporary repertoires, bringing previously unknown tunes (or formerly fashionable tunes) back into vogue.

Over winter months, players work to incorporate new tunes into their repertoires, preparing for the opportunity to share those new tunes at summer fiddlers' conventions. These conventions, scattered throughout the Appalachian South, draw thousands of Old-time players from around the country and abroad to wooded state parks or sweltering (or muddy) grassy fields, where they spend a week or a weekend camping, sweating, playing music, catching up, staying up late, and partying. For many, these events are annual social and musical highlights—some of the most meaningful moments of the year play out there. Although a general sense of friendliness rules the day, these conventions are highly stratified events, especially when it

comes to determining who will make music with whom. A hierarchy built around musical skill, knowledge, and shared taste structures the events. Expert players sit in small circles of three to six like-minded musicians and play tunes over the course of an afternoon or evening. These players might organize their session around a particular regional repertoire or the repertoire of a particular deceased master fiddler. Aspiring players might listen on the edges and make a recording if the session is compelling enough. These moments of music making are not open to other players. Listening is fine, but an unknown musician who attempts to join will likely be turned away. Aspiring players organize jams with other players who share similar skill levels and common repertoires. Less skilled jams tend to be more welcoming and, as a result, larger.

Contemporary Old-time musicians who seek to grow as players have an abundance of other learning opportunities available to them. A range of weeklong camps and workshops fill the bits of summer not claimed by fiddlers' conventions. At these camps, student musicians spend vacation days and a considerable amount of money taking a class or two from expert instructors, hearing one of the remaining older masters in concert, and jamming in the evenings (see Frisch 1987). Other learners may be content to attend a weekly or monthly jam at a nearby bar or restaurant and attempt to learn the body of tunes in favor there. Like jams at festivals, these sessions can be open or closed and have their own hierarchies. A jam at a pub in Seattle or Portland might develop its own repertoire of tunes pulled from older and newer recordings that differs from the repertoire cultivated at a jam in hip bar in Brooklyn or Boston. In this way, even though particular tunes are not endemic to these Old-time scenes, repertoires of tunes become tied to regions, cities, and jams. One might say, "That's such a West Coast tune," to describe rendition of an obscure, squirrely tune field-recorded in Kentucky but played in a style

associated with San Francisco, where many players seem to be drawn to these sorts of arcane, convoluted pieces.

Beyond jams, players may seek instruction from an expert player in their region or from a player like L.A.-based David Bragger, a musician who derives a significant part of his livelihood from giving Old-time fiddle and banjo lesson over Skype to students around the country and abroad. Others might seek instruction from a plethora of instructional materials—books filled with tablature (an easily read, instrument-specific map of a tune that tells a player where to place their fingers and how to move their pick, fingers, or bow) with accompanying CDs, or streaming lessons that require monthly subscriptions. Here they might find fiddle instruction that renders complex bowings as a series of patterns or as clever mnemonic phrases that translate the rhythm of the bow into an easily remembered rhyming phrase.

Learning players less inclined to spend money on lessons can lurk on YouTube and watch videos of contemporary musicians playing or teaching a tune or technique. They might join Facebook pages like the Old-time banjo-centric “Clawhammer Rules” to learn from other players about this particular technique of banjo playing that has, since the revival era become a dominant style. For those still hungry, there are the Old-time discussion boards hosted on sites like the Banjo Hangout and the Fiddle Hangout, where players debate style, technique, and the Old-timeness of a given performer or performance.<sup>6</sup> Of course, in these sorts of online spaces, a discussion participant with mediocre Old-time skills can claim expertise, and, in the absence of opportunities to hear their music, fellow participants will be none the wiser. A more recent development for aspiring Old-time musicians is the establishment of conservatory and secondary education performance-oriented programs that focus on Old-time music. For example, young

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<sup>6</sup> The Banjo Hangout is located at: <https://www.banjohangout.org/> The Fiddle Hangout is located at: <https://www.fiddlehangout.com/>

talented players with the requisite financial resources and musical skill needed to attend a conservatory can now study Old-time music at Berklee College of Music. Meanwhile, players who didn't benefit from this kind of elite training voice fear that in the hands of these young, conservatory trained musicians, this old, social music from the American South—a last bastion of what Greil Marcus called the “old, weird America”—will be ironed out, standardized, and rendered as bland and homogenous as the rest of life in America that so many players, now in their 60s and older, sought to escape through the seeming anti-consumerism and back-to-the-landishness of Old-time (Bealle 2005, Marcus 2011, Wooley 2003).

Just as the music attracted the boomer generation, it continues to attract listeners, learners, and players across generational and national boundaries. American Studies scholar Josh Kun reminds us that “music can be of a nation, but it is never exclusively national; it always overflows, spills out, sneaks through, reaches an ear on the other side of the border line, on the other side of the sea” (Kun 2005: 20). With the broad circulation of Old-time music and the abundance of learning opportunities, vibrant Old-time scenes can be found throughout the U.S., Canada, Australia, and the U.K. There are smaller scenes in Ireland, France, Denmark, Norway, Spain, Italy, Japan, and the Czech Republic. In the contemporary moment, Old-time music becomes what Kun might consider a transnational “audiotopia,” that is, one of many “small, momentary, lived utopias built, imagined, and sustained through sound, noise, and music” (Kun 2005: 20). It creates unexpected social and affective connections over an unlikely beautiful, old music with its own racially fraught history filled with exchanges and appropriations. In the era of divisive Trumpian politics, Old-time music and the events around it are a rare space in which Trump supporters and critics bump into each other, willingly occupy shared space, and, perhaps, make music together. I don't wish to paint too rosy a picture—these political divisions are deeply

felt and real. A past-oriented music with vibrant contemporary scenes, Old-time is a music filled with “unexpected vibrations in unexpected places” and opportunities for players to imagine new musical and social possibilities while also addressing and working against the inequities of its past (Dimock 1997).

### **Guiding Concerns and Questions**

As we approach the century mark for audio recording projects that began documenting traditional music forms in the southern U.S. (and elsewhere), it is worth examining and interrogating the profound ways that old commercial and field recordings shape contemporary performance practices and understandings of these genres, especially as copies of older commercial and field recordings circulate widely and unexpectedly, accumulating new meanings and inspiring new interpretations. “Catching the ‘Wild Note’: Listening, Learning and Connoisseurship in Old-Time Music” begins to do this work. This dissertation is an ethnography of listening, learning, and performance practices among expert Old-time musicians, especially musicians in East Tennessee. Focusing throughout on the way Old-time musicians engage sound technologies and recorded sound, this dissertation brings conversations about the splitting and circulation of sounds from their sources to bear on long-standing research concerns about modes of transmission of traditional and local knowledge. Thinking about the transmission of “traditional” music as a process thoroughly imbricated with sound technologies yields new questions, stories, and understandings about Old-time music making and the study of expressive culture.

Pushing beyond questions about authenticity or the processes of cultural revival at play in the transmission of local knowledge and expressive culture, I foreground and interrogate the presence and role of sound technologies in circulating, mediating, and sustaining local forms of

expressive culture. I describe musical traditions sustained *by* and *through* sound technologies and the intimate forms of sociality and community that emerge as artists bring recorded performances back into their performing bodies and into social relationships. I follow contemporary performers into recording projects and describe recording itself as kind of tradition in the genre—one governed by aesthetics of intimacy and liveness. I tell stories about technologically empowered processes of close listening and close learning and the ensuing performances and social relationships that give this music life and create smaller communities oriented around shared musical taste. I tell stories that reveal forms of community making among contemporary Old-time musicians in the United States, and an artistic community that finds inspiration in recorded sound and emerges from refined, creative listening and learning practices. Engaging sound technologies, these artists reimagine and lay claim to places and musical identities in new, unexpected ways. As this project foregrounds and interrogates the role of sound technologies in mediating and sustaining local forms of expressive culture, it invites researchers to consider carefully the entangled relationships between technologies, aesthetics, and masterful performances in contemporary traditional art forms. Rather than dismissing artistic projects that draw on recordings as less *authentic* than projects built around face-to-face learning, this dissertation invites researchers to consider the creative labor and relationships that form as these repertoires and styles are brought from grooves of shellac and reels of old tape into embodied performances and relationships.

This dissertation is an ethnography of listening practices, learning, and music making among expert contemporary Old-time musicians in Tennessee and beyond. I work in a vibrant genre that has long been represented (and idealized) as a face-to-face, largely unmediated folk or traditional music. My literature review, located in the appendix, provides an overview of

scholarship on Old-time music. However, this past-oriented genre now faces the loss of its last remaining old masters. In this context, I focus on the experiences of expert players, who, in the absence of face-to-face learning with (authenticated/agreed upon/verified) masters, primarily base their musical practices on the study and emulation of old recordings. These expert players engage in decades-long projects of emulation that involve assiduous listening and meticulous learning. Within the broader scene, they form a smaller community of shared taste, built around a culture of listening, learning, and connoisseurship. The musicians whose stories I tell are invested in the music in an intentional, sustained way; several of them have gained national and international attention as expert Old-time musicians. I don't presume to account for the experiences of all Old-time musicians; instead, I offer the stories of a handful of players who listen hard and play beautifully.

Focusing my attention on participants in this listening culture, I ask what kinds of creative and expressive possibilities and limits present themselves in an artistic world where—by virtue of change, loss, or necessity—long-valued and preferred modes of transmission (e.g., face-to-face learning, apprenticeship) give way to technologically mediated ones (e.g., a learning practice built around careful listening to canonical recordings). What shape does listening and learning take? What does a masterful performance sound and feel like, and who will recognize it as such? How does this listening culture affect aesthetics and performances? What kinds of sociality form in these situations? What kinds of relationships emerge in the absence of mentor/student relationships, and are these relationships shaped by the kinds of ethical obligations that marked earlier face-to-face learning relationships with master musicians? Do place or claims of ownership matter when the sources of knowledge have been split from their



human sources and geographic homes and circulate all over as MP3 copies of copies of old tape reels or shellac?

Over the course of this project, I also make an argument for going small. The title of this dissertation, “Catching the Wild Note,” hints at the concept. The wild note registers as a small, subtle shift in pitch. When heard or properly incorporated into a performance, it’s a powerful—though exquisitely subtle—musical gesture. Taking a cue from the wild note, this project relishes in smallness—the smallness of a jam session in a living room, the smallness of a musical gesture that plays out on a thin sliver of ebony on the fiddle’s fingerboard, the smallness of the three minute performance captured on an old 78 RPM record. My project dwells on the small details and experiences that a bigger story about a cultural process like revival is more likely to miss. Going small means I attend to the subtle details of performances, the relationships between groups of two or three musicians, the smallness of biographies, and the experience of music making in a corner of Tennessee. Going small also means that I draw on the smallness of my musical life. I explore my 23 years of experience learning this music in Tennessee, competing in (and occasionally) winning fiddle and banjo contests throughout the South, teaching at workshops, and performing on stages around the U.S., the U.K., and Canada. Unsurprisingly, my research as a folklorist merges with my experiences as a deeply invested learner, performer, and teacher of this music to bear in this project. I continue to be an active participant in this music, touring, making recordings, and teaching. I have made audio recordings of players around Tennessee since 1998. I spent two summers working on a traditional music projects in the region during the early 2000s. Along the way, I’ve recorded countless visits with musicians and jam sessions. I’ve conducted scores of formal interviews as well. All of these materials are tucked away in boxes in my closet and on hard drives. And all of these materials—from recorded

interviews to tapes of informal jams to visits with older master fiddlers—have informed my scholarship. My experiences as researcher and musician have often overlapped, and this project is no exception. In the end, going small led me to the details of listening, learning, and performing Old-time music, and the smaller stories of my fellow musicians.

### **Method and Approach**

In posing these questions, my project departs from earlier work that engages Old-time by posing questions about revival and authenticity, recounting histories of key revival figures or early recording artists, or documenting repertoires. While this scholarship and these concerns shape my work, I approach Old-time as an emergent genre, one mediated and sustained by and through sound technologies and human memory, embodied in musical motions and lived experiences, and formed in the circulatory flows that push these sounds into both new, unexpected places and more familiar sites. Connoisseur listener/learner/experts make new music that is deeply informed by old repertoires and styles captured on old commercial and field recordings. I approach the genre from my position as a folklorist, an ethnographer, and a performer/researcher, paying careful attention to the ways that genre is cultivated and inheres in bodily music practices. It is the *feeling* of this music, when it slips into the groove, that drives me as a performer; as a researcher, I hope that I can translate a scintilla of this music's power and beauty onto the page. I strive to convey the experiential and sensorial richness.<sup>7</sup>

To this end, and to better understand the experiences of the musicians with whom I work, I think with Bourdieu's (1984) well-worn and perennially illuminating theories of bodily dispositions and taste (*habitus*) and Mauss's (1973) "techniques of the body" in my mind. More recent anthropological and ethnomusicological explorations of embodiment, the senses, and

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<sup>7</sup> Andy Woolf's dissertation inspires me to try to convey the affective and experiential richness of making this music and offers a rich account of the Old-time fiddlers' convention scene (Woolf 1990).

bodily learning expand my thinking about the cultivation of listening dispositions and musical skill. My attention to the musical body is theoretically grounded in anthropological work on the body and the senses, including that of Thomas Csordas (1993), Paul Stoller (1997, 1989), and Natalia Seremetakis (1994); they argue for paying attention to and with the body as a site of knowledge, learning, and memory. Ethnomusicological explorations of the body also prove instructive. Following Lila Ellen Gray's (2013) work on affect and embodied genre in Portuguese Fado, and Aaron Fox's (2004) exploration of feelingful performance in country music, my project conceives of genre as embodied and felt, and seeks to understand how performances come to feel meaningful for performers and their audiences. In writing biographically about Old-time players, I follow Fox, Grey, and Steven Feld (2012), as well as Paul Berliner's (1993) earlier work, and argue that genre is often best understood through the lived experiences of practitioners.

I bring my own learning and performing body into play in a more pronounced way than other scholars of Old-time music have done. In doing so, I follow a well-trod path in ethnomusicology as I foreground my own bodily, musical learning as a form of research and scholarship (Baily 2001, 2008, Berliner 1994, 1993, Hood 1960, Sudnow 1978).<sup>8</sup> Alongside this attention to bodily learning and the ways that genre inheres in the bodies of musicians, Matthew Rahaim's (2012) discussion of learning and embodied performance lineages in Hindustani music inspires my approach to understanding Old-time. Although he describes face-to-face transmission, his thinking about "the patterns and dispositions of the musicking body . . . made available through teaching lineages" leads me to consider the ways that performances fixed on sound recordings give rise to their own kinds of lineages and student/teacher relationships (even

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<sup>8</sup> Please see the Appendix where a Literature Review presents a more thorough discussion of the well-established researcher as performer approach.

if the teacher has passed away) (2012: 159). Contemporary, Old-time performers trace teaching lineages (or perhaps listening/learning lineages); the ubiquitous presence of recordings and digital tools for making those recordings scrutable create an interesting wrinkle in these genealogical constructions.

Additionally, dancer and researcher Tomie Hahn's (2007) sensorially engaged work on Japanese dance, especially her detailed attention to her experience as a learner, inspires me to account for the subtle motions involved in learning and making Old-time music. Her rich, patient descriptions pull the reader into this world of motion and senses. Her poetics inspire me. Throughout the project, I invite my readers to linger and puzzle over sounds and the details of techniques, and, in turn, to recognize the challenges that players face as they puzzle over sounds and the relationship between sounds and bodies. Rendering these sounded practices sonorous on the page presents profound difficulties. These challenges inform the poetics and the arguments of the following chapters. It is my hope that in tracing the fastidious care with which these musicians work to translate old recordings into embodied musical practices, my reader will gain some sense of the immense labor and intimate attention that the music requires of its expert practitioners.

Like the hisses of surface noise on an old 78 RPM records, these ways of thinking about listening, bodily learning, and music making float above (or, perhaps, flow underneath) this dissertation. They are ubiquitous marks of my training, shaping the arguments, execution, and poetics of my project. In the end, I hope that my readers ear is drawn to the sounds and stories of the musicians who give this dissertation shape and purpose.<sup>9</sup> Theirs is the real insight. They are

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<sup>9</sup> My reader will notice that many of the stories I tell are about men, and that women are scarce. This fact has more to do with who the most accomplished players were in my research site than anything else. I have written at length elsewhere about Old-time musician and East Tennessean Tammie McCarroll's experiences making music with her

the artists who live with and in this music, struggling to rein these wild sounds into their bodies and render beautiful, carefully studied, yet profoundly individualistic performances.

In this project, I write for my fellow scholars and for these artists who move me. In doing so, I hitch my cart to two unwieldy mules; writing for my fellow researchers, while also writing in ways that are intelligible to the artists who have generously shared their music and stories with me, is a challenge. I have made a point of sharing my work with and soliciting feedback from those artists who made this project possible, and, just as this world is better because of the music they make, this project is better for their sustained presence. I recognize and am grateful for their creative labor, acknowledging the ways that I benefit from it, and I celebrate their artistry. Even as these connoisseur listeners/learner/players sense the absence of the old master players on whom they base their art, they push this music forward with thoughtfulness, incredible ears, creativity, and a deep sense of responsibility to those players who sounded out the genre in a very different moment in time.

### **The Site: Chattanooga, Tennessee**

Three of the five following chapters describe the Old-time listening, learning, and music making in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and on the nearby Cumberland Plateau. (A sixth chapter describes Old-time recordings from around Harriman, Tennessee, one hundred miles northeast of

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father, representing a family musical tradition that gave her much pleasure (Decosimo 2012). At a much earlier point in time, women, like the banjo player Florrie Stewart from outside of Chattanooga, were discouraged from playing the music: it was seen as “unbecoming.” In her writing about the music around Chattanooga at the turn of the last century, Chattanooga local Emma Bell Miles describes men doing most of the public music making around her home, while women tended to sing at home (1975 [1905], 2014). The 1920s fiddlers’ conventions mention some fiddling and banjo-playing women, but, based on the reporting, the majority of participants were men. The revival era brought a number of women players into the genre, and now, it is not uncommon for fiddle contest finals to consist entirely of women. Women have made vital and critical contributions to Old-time music, from early pioneers like the Coon Creek Girls, Samantha Bumgarner, and Mother Maybelle Carter, to contemporary masters like Alice Gerrard, Gabrielle Macrae, and Rhiannon Giddens. Many younger players and singers, like Anna Roberts Gevalt and Elizabeth LaPrelle, are pushing the boundaries of the genres, and making beautiful, thoughtful, and ridiculously creative music on the national stage. I look forward to reading scholarship that explores the experiences and contribution of women in Old-time music.

Chattanooga.) In situating much of the project around Chattanooga, I offer an alternative narrative to the revival-focused stories that are often told about the genre. The story of Old-time in Chattanooga is one of local actors creatively sustaining and reimagining the music over time. As a research site, the broader East Tennessee region has particular valence in the Old-time community as a mythic and historic home of the music (Wolfe and Olson 2005). It has provided an abundance of key commercial recordings and field recordings that now circulate as “source material” (i.e., the older recorded material that contemporary players draw upon as sources for repertoire and style). The famous Bristol, Johnson City, and Knoxville commercial recording sessions took place in this region late 1920s. Chattanooga was a hub of Old-time activity in the 1920s.

Now, Chattanooga is a city of almost 180,000 in a metro area of a half million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). It is the fourth largest city in Tennessee, and is growing rapidly with the opening of a Volkswagen assembly factory in 2011 and ongoing efforts to attract the tech industry.<sup>10</sup> In the spring of 2018, *The New York Times* travel editor Jada Yuan listed the city as one of the fifty-two places to visit in 2018, optimistically writing “Chattanooga is changing. But its charms remain. Despite some transformative growing pains, the city may well be one of the most pleasant and livable ones in the United States” (Yuan 2018). These growing pains are evident as many of the city’s schools are underperforming, and as historically black neighborhoods are facing the pressures of gentrification (Cohen 2015). As of the 2010 census, the city is 58% white, 35% black, and has a growing Latinx population (U.S. Census Bureau,

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<sup>10</sup> Manufacturing and industry have long driven the city. Drummer Clyde Stubblefield—James Brown’s drummer who came up with the heavily sampled “funky drummer” rhythm (sampled by Public Enemy, RUN DMC, LL Cool J, Ice T, Prince and a multitude of others)—claims that the factories and trains of mid-century Chattanooga inspired his iconic beats: “There was a factory there that puffed out air — pop-BOOM, pop-BOOM — hit the mountains and came back as an echo. . . . And train tracks — click-clack, click-clack. I listened to all that for six years, playing my drums against it” (cited in Jacobson 2015).

2016). Nestled along the banks of the Tennessee River and hemmed in by the Cumberland Plateau to the north and west and long ridges to the east, Chattanooga is a diverse, urban, Appalachian community that transformed itself in the 1980s and early 1990s from a profoundly polluted, post-industrial city with a languishing downtown into a vibrant city with a bustling downtown, a freshwater aquarium, a pedestrian-friendly riverfront, and an identity as the “Scenic City”— a tourist-friendly city that caters to rock climbers, paddlers, hang gliders, and cyclists.

Because of Chattanooga’s strategic location at the southern end of the Tennessee River Valley, along an unofficial Old-time entertainment highway that carried the enterprising professional Old-time musicians of the 1920s from Atlanta through Chattanooga, Knoxville, and Upper East Tennessee into Southwest Virginia, many iconic names of the 1920s commercial recording boom—Lowe Stokes, Jess Young, the Allen Brothers, Jim and Andrew Baxter—called Chattanooga home, and many others did stints in the city. A number of the canonic, commercially recorded musicians regularly played at fiddlers’ conventions and events in the city during the 1920s and 1930s. Country music historian Charles Wolfe describes the city as having “one of the most eclectic musical climates for early country music,” because it was a “crossroads for different musical styles, attracting not only artists from Tennessee but also musicians from north Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi” (1977: 49). Chattanooga’s newspapers breathlessly reported on the music, especially the annual All Southern Fiddlers’ Convention during the late 1920s, leaving behind a trail of articles (see chapter 2). In the first quarter of the last century, the city was home to a complex musical world, filled with enterprising and creative black and white performers; a young Bessie Smith, for instance, even performed on the streets of Chattanooga

(Albertson 2003, Scott 2008). The Dynamo of Dixie was a place where black and white musicians exchanged musical ideas.<sup>11</sup>

A handful of local players, like fiddler Bob Douglas (1900-2001), carried the music on even after its popularity waned in the 1930s (see Fulcher 2008), maintaining their older repertoire while embracing more popular styles like Western Swing. Old-time weaseled its way into Jack Savage's Texas Ranch, an outdoor venue just south of the city where audiences in the late 1930s gathered to hear country and western performances. Somehow, Bob Douglas managed to make his living as a fiddler in Chattanooga over the better part of the last century. He produced a number of self-released albums, played dance halls, and took whatever gigs were available. In the 1980s, he began to interface with the world of public folklore programming, playing at events like the National Folk Festival, while continuing to play at local venues like the Mountain Opry.

While the 1970s Old-time revival swept through nearby Knoxville, it never really gained traction in Chattanooga; most Old-time musicians just kept doing what they had been doing. The fact that Chattanooga was not a hub of revival is critical to this project; it offers an alternative story about Old-time—one of sustained, creative music making. Around the time that Bob Douglas gained some attention in the 70s and 80s, the Pine Breeze project (1975-1981)—run by Chattanooga musician Ron Williams, through a residential program for emotionally disturbed youth—used public folklore grants to record the few local players who had grown up playing in the region; those recordings have become a vital source of material for contemporary players.

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<sup>11</sup> I don't wish to suggest that these exchanges were even or not shaped by power balances. However, I work to recover the presence of African American musicians who shaped Old-time in the city. Local writer Emma Bell Miles offers rich descriptions of moments of exchange, though the circumstances of the music making are profoundly unjust: it was the oppressive chain gang system that led to encounters between black musicians and her banjo-playing brother-in-law in the 1910s, on Walden's Ridge, just north of Chattanooga (Miles 2014).



The project came about during the era when state folklore programs were being created across the nation. A six hundred dollar grant from the Tennessee Arts Commission got the Pine Breeze project off the ground. Sales from their first record allowed the program to fund subsequent projects, ultimately creating a self-sustaining label. Through the Pine Breeze projects, Ron Williams documented a fascinating world of local, funky Old-time music that had weathered the better part of the 20th Century. The music that he and his students documented has become a valuable resource among contemporary Old-time players; renditions of pieces from this repertoire can be heard on YouTube from players overseas.

It wasn't until the early 2000s that Old-time again became a potent piece of Chattanooga's musical portfolio (see chapter 2). Christie Burns' Folk School of Chattanooga created a space for Old-time learning and jams for several years in the 2000s and 2010s. A weekly Old-time jam fired up around this time and has continued in one form or another for almost a decade. A few Old-time musicians began playing shows around town, exploring local repertoires. Old-time musicians have found a place in Chattanooga's contemporary musical life—a life that includes vibrant hip-hop, indie rock, punk, gospel, and bluegrass scenes. Now heard on the street, in clubs, at tourist sites, and at the city's musical festivals, Old-time circulates in Chattanooga as a hip, DIY, less-mediated kind of local music.

I have been engaged in fieldwork in Chattanooga and broader East Tennessee since 2003. It is also where I grew up and learned to play music. In the moments when I've found myself working professionally as a musician, the repertoire and style of Chattanooga and the surrounding region have been at the core of my artistic practice. When I teach at summer camps and festivals, and during my year teaching fiddle and banjo and coaching string bands in East Tennessee State University's Bluegrass, Old-time, and Country Music Program, I've pushed my

students to engage with music from this region. Unsurprisingly, it's where some of my deepest musical relationships are. Many of the stories I tell in this dissertation are drawn from musical relationships sustained over decades. These intimate relationships, both mine and those that form as my consultants engage deeply with this music, are at the heart of this project.

### **The Sociality of Listening in Old-time**

Listening is a key activity among Old-time connoisseurs. These musicians maintain intense, private listening practices. In the genre, listening is a highly subjective experience. It is also, simultaneously, a highly social activity. There are the obvious social forms of listening like spinning an old 78 RPM record or vintage vinyl for a fellow connoisseur. But there are other intriguing, less obvious possibilities for social listening in Old-time. These take shape as players use Dropbox to share MP3s of old field recordings that they recently discovered with friends, expecting that they will learn this music together. The kinds of listening activities in which Old-time connoisseurs engage involves imagining the bodies of the absent, recorded player in intimate detail. I argue that this kind of listening represents another point of human connection in which a musician/listener can come to feel a sense of ethical and artistic responsibility to get the old absent players' music correct—to play it right (see chapter 4).

A handful of scholars have shaped my thinking on the sociality of listening. Through their ethnographies, they reveal that an activity as seemingly subjective and individual as private audition can also be deeply social and performative. Most notably, David Novak (2013), in his study of Japanoise, describes a feedback link connecting private listening practices among noise musicians to public discourses about music. He writes: “To close the distances of global circulation, listeners and performers alike become deeply invested in the personal embodiment of sound. Absorbed in sound, they bring recordings into their senses, and they then feed their

experiences back into public discourse as a mediated form of musical knowledge” (2013: 22). Even when they listen alone and cultivate “sensibilities of recorded sound” (ibid.), Old-time connoisseurs are connected to a social discourse of taste. Other ethnographers, like Lila Ellen Gray (2013), have described the performative dimensions of listening. Riffing on Raymond Williams’ “structures of feeling,” Lila Ellen Gray demonstrates how “structures of listening” shape the ways Portuguese Fado listeners listen, leading to soulful performances of listening that make interior feelings visible. With her concept, she traces a link between the interior, affective, and subjective qualities of listening and “the sociability of listening, the sociality of hearing, and their emergent qualities” (2013: 43). Drawing on Bourdieu, ethnomusicologist Judith Becker describes a “habitus of listening . . . an inclination, a disposition to listen with a particular kind of focus, to expect to experience particular kinds of emotion, to move with certain stylized gestures, and to interpret the meaning of the sounds and one’s emotional responses to the musical event in somewhat (never totally) predictable ways (2004: 71). Listening connoisseurs in Old-time develop particular listening dispositions as they connect over old recordings and articulate what they find compelling in these recordings. The following chapters map the contours of these listening practices.

### **Connoisseurs of Old Recordings**

Which brings me to the word *connoisseur*—a word that is likely to draw a chuckle from readers familiar with the broader Old-time world, where musicians decorate instrument cases with stickers proclaiming “Old-time music: Better Than It Sounds.” The concept recognizes the serious artistry and creativity in play behind the self-critical jokes in which many Old-time musicians engage. It elevates the old recordings. Using a word more readily encountered in elite culinary and oenophile culture gives us pause, insisting that we recognize the artistry of Old-time

and the cultivation of a rarified auditory taste that emerges through careful, sustained listening projects. The word *connoisseur* gets at the kinds of refined embodied understandings and tastes cultivated within these listening projects. The concept of *connoisseurship*, in turn, invites us to consider in a different light the immense artistry of the older, often rural, musicians who are documented on recordings. This language refigures them as cosmopolitan musicians creating a musician's music worthy of sustained attention.

### **Activities of Connoisseurship: Listening, Learning, and Emulating**

Musical sounds that float around in the world, detached from their human sources, are critical to my project. Sounds of all sorts, both split from their sources and emerging from unseen sources, have long posed a theoretical problem for theorists, musicians, and thinkers (Chion 2016, Kane 2014, Schafer 1994). Composer R. Murray Schafer's term "schizophonia"—"the splitting of sounds from their original contexts"—frames my thinking (1994: 88). He defines the term: "The Greek prefix *schizo* means split, separated; and *phono* is Greek for voice. Schizophonia refers to the split between an original sound and its electroacoustical transmission or reproduction" (1994: 90). Schafer, who like many Old-time musicians, tends to romanticize the past, makes for a suitable traveling companion. The splitting of sounds from their musical sources raises provocative questions about circulation and the possibilities of cultural appropriation,<sup>12</sup> but for most of my consultants it presents itself as a much more practical

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<sup>12</sup> This way of describing the dislocation of sound in time and space has gotten play in strands of scholarship running through ethnomusicology. Charles Keil's (1984) provocative exploration of the relationship between *live* and *mediated* music sets up one path. It continues in Steven Feld's work on the promiscuous circulation of field recordings during the Worldbeat moment of the late 1980s and 1990s. Feld develops schizophonia as he considers the ways that local musics come into play through recording technologies in new places, raising questions about intellectual property, cultural appropriation, and cultural imperialism. Feld's term "schizophonic mimesis" describes the ways that field recorded sounds and performances were incorporated, reimagined, and imitated on a range of recorded projects from Madonna albums, to Worldbeat, to Jazz. Feld clarifies the term and its usage: "By 'schizophonic mimesis' I want to question how sonic copies, echoes, resonances, traces, memories, resemblances, imitations, duplications all proliferate histories and possibilities. This is to ask how sound recordings, split from their

problem (e.g., How did that musician accomplish that sound? How do I capture the feeling of the bowing in that recording? Is Marcus Martin's fiddle that resonant or is that some weird artifact of the audio technology?). That is not to say that Old-time musicians aren't interested in thinking about the ways technologies have mediated the music. Because it has been split from its sources and circulates in curious ways, Old-time musicians find the music to be good to think with (see chapter 2). My consultants speak eloquently and thoughtfully about their relationships to old recordings, sensing the contradictions in play as they tell me about the arbitrary, snapshot nature of old field recordings—a blip in a longer musical life—into which they've invested considerable learning effort, often over many years. These expert Old-time musicians work diligently and creatively to bring sounds split from, in this case, human sources into their performing bodies.

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source through the chain of audio production, circulation, and consumption stimulate and license renegotiations of identity" (1996:13). Circulation opens "new possibilities whereby a place and people can be recontextualized, rematerialized, and thus thoroughly reinvented" (ibid.) His concept is provocative. Although the World Music moment has passed, ethnomusicologist David Novak (2011) describes the recent emergence of "World Music 2.0," which involves smaller, boutique labels circulating "raw uncirculated material" (2011: 605). He explains: "But World Music 2.0 does not originate in the appropriation of global sounds in popular works by Western authors. . . . Rather it is based in the redistribution of existing recordings of regional popular music—most which already bear a strong formal and technological relationship with Western popular culture—as a 'new old' media" (2011: 605). In my mind, Old-time music circulates within this World Music 2.0 framework.

As I further develop this dissertation project, I hope to draw on these threads of thought and explore questions of cultural appropriation and ownership. Over the last couple years, I have watched and listened as Old-time musicians have initiated challenging conversations about race, place, and cultural appropriation. In the broader Old-time scene, people of color have taken the lead in starting some of these conversations, asking what it means to deify or canonize older master players who may have been racists or sang racist lyrics. These conversations are just starting, but I believe that my work intersects with them. And I think the line of thinking around schizophonia could be helpful. Following this thinking, I have tentatively called the process of bringing old recorded sounds back into performing bodies "schizophonic reauralization." At this point, I would define it as a process through which sounds that have been separated from their sources through sound technologies enter back into the realm of aural and oral performance through a musician's engagement with sound technologies. The term describes what contemporary musicians are doing with the music as they engage sound recordings and transform recorded performances and repertoires, separated from their human and geographic sources, into sounded, embodied performances. I table now further discussion of this concept in hopes that I can address it adequately in future research, when I can look at the ways musicians address questions of cultural appropriation and ownership. At this point, these critical aspects of the concept need further development.

Efforts to learn from recordings or radio—sounds split from their sources—have long been a part of Old-time music making. Old-time recording artists of the 1920s “golden era” listened to contemporary recordings of pop tunes and incorporated them into their own performances and recordings. For example, Old-time banjo player Charlie Poole consumed popular recordings and then recorded Old-time versions of them (Huber 2008). Other musicians, like East Tennessean Charlie Acuff, who came of age during the 78 RPM era, described the ways that he and his brother would manipulate the phonograph, manually slowing it down to learn new material. Similarly, radio broadcasts of Nashville fiddler Arthur Smith’s polished, bluesy fiddling shaped a generation of Old-time fiddlers who came of age in the 1940s, leading to wildly different interpretations of his playing and repertoire. During the 1970s, the Rogers and Wilson family of Tennessee’s Powell Valley sustained a local repertoire and style as older expert fiddler Bob Rogers, who played professionally in L.A., made recordings of himself playing Powell Valley tunes for his younger cousin Russ Wilson to learn from. Russ listened carefully and mastered the style (chapter 4 explores a similar story from the region). Whatever the case, sound technologies of all sorts have mediated learning, performances, and repertoires of this music for almost a century.

In contemporary Old-time, listening and learning connoisseurs engage in intense listening and learning projects. For them, these two activities blend labor and pleasure and are often inseparable: listening is often learning, and learning is often listening. In many cases, these entangled projects emerge over decades. As these experts listen, tunes unfold, techniques clarify, and nuance overlooked in earlier attempts at mastering the tune are incorporated into future renditions. Over time and through creative work, players reimagine lo-fidelity recordings in the hi-fidelity realm of their embodied music making. As players listen, they become better listeners.

They begin to conceptualize the motions and tendencies of older fiddlers documented on these recordings. However, there is rarely a point of completion. The playing of a tune is subject to perpetual revision and adjustment as new twists and turns are heard (and at time imagined) in the older source recording. As limited as these old recordings may seem, they become sites of endless interpretation and creativity. The listening and learning connoisseurs of Old-time come to know these older recorded performances intimately as sources of pleasure, inspiration, and, at times, frustration.

These intense listening and learning projects can be thought of in terms of emulation. *Emulate* is the word that often comes up when masterful players tell me about their process of listening and learning: it's a word that entered English during Shakespeare's lifetime from a Latin verb *aemulāri*—to rival.<sup>13</sup> Being a transitive verb, emulation requires an object to be rivaled, imitated, or equaled; for this group of musicians, the object, especially now in the absence of older masters, is often a sound recording. They emulate sounds, but they also emulate other objects, conjuring the bodies and imagining the motions that produced those sounds through their creative work. Emulation is an embodied process that engages the learner's sensorium and imagines the body of the older musician; musicians talk about *getting the feel* for and of another player. At first glance it seems that this kind of mimetic process would be stifling and devoid of creativity. Yet it is profoundly creative and imaginative. Working in the realm of sound, these players, through their mimetic work, discover their own bodies' limits and capabilities. Reaching the limits of their own hearing acuity or the limits of information on a recording, players imaginatively extrapolate and fill in gaps with motions.

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<sup>13</sup> "emulate, v.". OED Online. March 2018. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/61459?rskey=1Wcnp6&result=2> (accessed April 1, 2018).

As they emulate and seek to master older styles and sounds, these experts develop their own sound, shaped by a lineage of listening. In this form of masterful performance, listening and learning connoisseurs sense the lineages of listening and paths of emulation in each other's performance. A connoisseur player's style emerges as a polyphonic series of musical utterances, shaped by sustained projects of listening and emulation (Bakhtin 1981). For connoisseurs, making music with fellow connoisseurs feels different (see chapter 5). One of the pleasures in this realm of connoisseurship comes as connoisseurs recognize the ways that fellow connoisseurs incorporate small musical gestures gleaned from old, canonical recordings or, in some cases, obscure field recordings. These gestures can be performed in any number of ways. It could be a goofy, long winded guitar run, lifted from a 1928 recording of Riley Puckett. Or it could be a bowing motion—a series of winding and unwinding circles—that creates the punchy rhythm and sound of Oscar Overturf as captured on an old field recording. Maybe it emerges as a fiddle note that seems ever so slightly off—a bit out of tune, but recalling Tommy Jarrell's intonation on all those old County LPs. Or it could be that strident dissonance on the banjo that sounds a lot like what Dick Burnett did on that 1927 Columbia 78 RPM record. Among these connoisseurs, these gestures and the listening practices that they reveal are critical to music. They demonstrate not only competency, but the fact that the musician who performs them has done his or her listening homework.

On the flip side, among these expert listeners, contemporary performances that are devoid of any of these citations are considered boring, unstudied, and less Old-time. In the same vein, a contemporary player who misquotes or inappropriately quotes an old recording or player might be considered lacking in taste or in need of remedial listening. Fiddlers come under particular scrutiny, especially in regards to bowing. Because the fiddle drives most jam sessions and



bowing creates the rhythms and grooves of those sessions, proper Old-time bowing, informed by old recordings, is a key piece of the music. Bowing that has nothing to do with older techniques, as captured on recordings, is considered suspect. For connoisseurs, old recordings serve as a key measure for contemporary performances.

Within this culture of connoisseurship, getting the music right in a masterful way is about incorporating and reworking motions gleaned from old recordings into one's music making. Listening lineages provide these players with a stylistic foundation and repertoire. Listening and learning allow this community to form.

### **The Aesthetics of Connoisseurship: Oldness, Offness, and Liveness as On-ness**

Through these practices of listening and learning, an aesthetic emerges. Reflecting on my fieldwork and conversations with these listening connoisseur musicians, I identify three aesthetic qualities that matter immensely to these players. These structure my thinking and shape my dissertation. They point towards the new pathways to mastery that are emerging within this community. They also point towards the aesthetics that shape masterful performances. Shaped by their listening and learning practices, this expert community places a premium on the qualities of *oldness*, *offness*, and *liveness*. Through community interactions, listening, and performance, these connoisseur players come to feel, recognize, and perform oldness, offness, and liveness as on-ness.

I introduce the idea of on-ness as a way of thinking about mastery and aesthetics. On-ness speaks to shared feelings in listeners and performers when a particular sound or performance feels appropriately Old-time. On-ness is felt by listeners and performers when a player convincingly incorporates old sounds within a contemporary performance. A listener feels on-ness when she is moved by an old field recording, or describes the beauty of a particular musical

moment to another listener or performer. The concept of on-ness registers shared affective and aesthetic responses among listeners and performers when particular sounds or performances feel appropriately Old-time. Negotiated in talk and through performances (in person and in recordings studios), on-ness is an emergent, situational aesthetic category that's about getting the music right. Masterful performances reckon with the qualities of oldness, offness, and liveness to be aesthetically pleasing in this slice of the contemporary Old-time scene.

As a concept, oldness accounts for the ways in which understandings of mastery and temporality play off each other in a music form that is decidedly engaged with the past. Older modes of transmission and source materials are valued more highly than the newer (e.g., musicians might critique a recently composed tune if it doesn't sound "old."). A genre oriented around the past is not without its problems; in chapter 2, I reveal the ways that celebrations and representation of the genre's imagined oldness in 1920s newspapers served as silencing celebrations of whiteness. This legacy remains, even as contemporary players think about the music's oldness in less obviously problematic ways. In chapter 3, I reveal how ideas of oldness circulate among contemporary practitioners and the ways that private listening practices feed back into imaginative social listening experiments/events (Novak 2013). Many Old-time musicians fetishize old recordings, old instruments, old technologies, old costumes, and old sounds. As an aesthetic, oldness forms in particular ways in particular places (e.g., the Galax fiddlers' convention celebrates a moment of music from the 1960s when Old-time and Bluegrass music blended in curious ways, while the contest at the Mt. Airy Fiddlers Convention tends to reward those who recreate a sound documented on field recordings and albums made in Surry County, North Carolina, during the 1970s).

Offness is about the ways that master musician connoisseurs cultivate an aesthetic of dissonance through learning, listening, and performance (e.g., microtonal notes, scratchy bowing).<sup>14</sup> In chapter 5, I argue that proper performances of offness as “bad notes” demonstrate a deep understanding and mastery of older recordings and older aesthetics. With the rise of conservatory programs, performances of offness allow some players to position themselves in opposition to conservatory approaches that they believe are too clean, affected, or unstudied. Dissonances and sounds that are undesirable in most Western Classical performances reveal lineages of pitch and aesthetics that map out long-term listening and learning practices.

The quality of liveness links powerful, intimate lived musical experiences to recorded performances and recording processes. As I demonstrate in chapter 6, liveness becomes an aesthetic value that recording engineers mediate in the production of masterful recordings. Signs of liveness, heard on old and new recordings, index the intimacy that players encounter at festivals and in jams. Liveness is about auditory closeness, feeling as if you are in the midst of the session. Old-time musicians make and consume recordings filled with signs of liveness because they represent the music as face-to-face. As a concept, liveness refers to the ideals, experiences, and sounds associated with unmediated, face-to-face music making and learning.

There are other aesthetic qualities that shape Old-time music making; however, players who engage in intense listening and learning projects of emulation voice concerns over these qualities of oldness, offness, and liveness most intensely.

## **Overview**

While the following chapters explore the emergent categories of oldness (chapters 2 and 3), offness (chapter 5), and liveness (chapter 6), they also illustrate a key process of circulation at

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<sup>14</sup> Put crudely, the term “microtones” describes notes that cannot be found on the piano and resist transcription on the staff.

play in Old-time: the process of splitting sounds, embodying sounds, and splitting them again as contemporary players make recordings. The chapters chart the process of mechanically splitting sounds from their human sources (chapter 2); listening, learning, and emulating those sounds (chapter 3, 4, and 5); and splitting those sounds again through recording processes (chapter 6, conclusion). In this way, I highlight the ongoing presence of sound technologies and related projects of listening in a genre that has often been romanticized and represented as a less-mediated, face-to-face music. In the story that I tell, sound technologies are imbricated at each point. Especially now, forms of listening and learning connoisseurship rely on the ability to access, hear, and emulate old, recorded music.

Likewise, the scale of my inquiry contrasts and expands over the course of the dissertation. I look at the sociality that forms around Old-time at different levels and in different places. Chapters 2 and 3 consider the ways that the genre circulates within a city as people engage with the music at large-scale Old-time events. Chapter 4 narrows to consider the intimacy of a jam session and the close relationships that form between three musicians over years of music making. Chapter 5 constricts even more tightly to consider how individual musicians refine listening, learning, and performance skills and create a small community of connoisseurs of offness. Chapter 6 expands back outward, looking at how Old-time bands make recordings that convey the intimacy of their music making to consumers of Old-time music.

Here's a more detailed overview:

Chapter 2 examines the way that Old-time and the idea of "Old Fiddling" circulated through new technologies, notably radio and 78 RPM records, and formed as a white, past-oriented genre in 1920s Chattanooga. This was a moment when fiddling received national attention, and one when Old-time sounds were first recorded and came to be thought of as a style

and sound. I explore the politics of representation shaping the music during the era, particularly the ways that the 1920s media and record labels subtly represented the music's oldness as one thread in a much larger project of whiteness. By the 1920s, Chattanooga had experienced decades of industrialization and major demographic shifts as African Americans migrated into this growing city. In this milieu, the newspapers represented old fiddling and Old-time as a cultural form that emerged from an imagined white past. I describe a series of fiddlers' conventions that drew thousands of attendees to hear 1920s Old-time recording artists compete and perform in city's new, state-of-the-art auditorium. Attending to the embodied repertoires and lived experiences of two of Chattanooga's old fiddlers and recording artists—white fiddler Jess Young and black fiddler Andrew Baxter—I reveal a far more complex, racially entangled history of the music, its practitioners, and the city.

Chapter 3 maps Chattanooga's Old-time scene from the 1990s to the present, tracing the work of two key musicians, two key sites of music making, and the creative, deeply participatory projects that Old-time inspires in the city. Working against the 1920s media representations of the genre, I highlight the ways that Chattanooga's musicians have found beauty and creative possibilities in this old music. Drawing on my experiences during the 1990s as a fledgling banjo player at a weekly pass-the-hat music gathering, I catalogue the creativity and diversity of Old-time banjo styles and reveal the informal forms of learning that I encountered. I present the listening, learning, and performing biography of a Matt Downer, a key player in Chattanooga's scene, and his path to the genre through Noise and experimental music. A feedback loop forms between Matt's private listening practices and the emergent social listening experiments they inspire, notably the unamplified Great Southern Fiddlers' Convention. New possibilities for oldness emerge in Chattanooga. The event fosters meaningful social connections as musicians

and listeners gather to listen for the past. Sociality intensifies as jams form and musicians bring old sounds to life, infusing the music with new meanings.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on projects of emulation and intimacy. In chapter 4, I focus on musical learning and the intimate music making and relationships that come about as musicians make decidedly local music west of Chattanooga on the Cumberland Plateau. With special attention to fiddle bowing and the imaginative work of reconstructing it from old recordings, I look at the process that plays out as fiddler Bob Townsend listens hard and emulates the playing of Cumberland Plateau fiddler Oscar Overturf, whom he never met. Townsend's learning texts are disintegrating reels of tape and, later, digitally enhanced copies of field recordings that his playing partner Charles Higgins made. Charles' memories of Oscar's motions fill in the gaps in these lo-fidelity tapes. I reveal sustained and mediated local music making and a decades-long project of emulation marked by creativity as Bob "Oscarizes" himself and "Bobizes" Oscar. Intimate social relations form around this project of listening and learning, allowing musicians to create new, old grooves and remember departed friends.

Chapter 5 delves deeper into projects of listening and emulation to develop the concept of offness—a quality that connoisseur musicians link to oldness. Among connoisseurs, intimate listening leads to a taste for dissonance and to miniscule but meaningful shifts in pitch. Moving into the broader Old-time scene beyond Chattanooga, I consider the ways that listening connoisseurs come to hear, learn, and perform various forms of offness. Through intense listening projects, they come to feel and perform “bad notes” (i.e., microtonal dissonances) as good intonation. In properly incorporating offness and “bad notes” in their playing, they demonstrate their deep and perceptive listening practices to fellow participants in this listening culture. Genealogies of listening and pitch emerge. Cultivating and performing offness becomes

a way for players to position themselves as serious, expert listeners. It also becomes a way to for them to differentiate themselves from what they might describe as the overly clean or affected sound of younger conservatory-trained players who are refiguring the genre.

Chapter 6 contributes to ethnographic research on recording studios as I trace the ways that first-hand listening encounters with the music and listening practices built around old, live (i.e., recordings of people playing music in the same space at the same time) recordings shape their pursuit of liveness (i.e., the quality of live recording). Liveness comes into play at Studio 808a and in the field recordings that East Tennessean Tony Thomas makes and sells at local gift shops and performances. In both cases, the engineers strive to convey intimate moments of music making. In state-of-the-art Studio 808a, engineer and Old-time musician Joe Dejarnette records musicians live as they sit too close to each other. He transforms the sonic bleed—a thing that many contemporary engineers go to great lengths to avoid (through, e.g., isolation booths)—into a sign of life. He finesses it to give listeners a sense of being close to the session, much like the kind of close experiences they have with the music at festivals and in jams. The second half of the chapter examines Tony Thomas' field recordings of Charlie McCarroll. Tony represents a parlor jam session among close friends through a consumer-grade four-track tape recording and an album that values first-takes and spontaneity. Old-time recording practices reflect the intimacy of Old-time jams.

I conclude with Chattanooga musician Matt Downer, "The Old-Time Traveler," making wax cylinder recordings that he sells on Bandcamp. Practices of intense listening to old recordings lead a number of expert players to mediate themselves through the older technologies as they try to figure out if they actually sound like the old players. Certainly, they find the process novel and fun, but there's also a deeper curiosity at play.





## CHAPTER 2: MEDIATING OLDNESS: OLD FIDDLES, OLD FIDDLERS, OLD FIDDLING IN 1920S CHATTANOOGA

### Introduction

In 1925, Chattanooga was afflicted with a case of fiddle fever.<sup>1</sup> So was much of the nation. A spectacle of fiddling, fiddles, and fiddlers, the city's All Southern Fiddlers' Convention was one of the many such gatherings that could be found in the American South, and throughout the U.S., during the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> The growing interest in old fiddling during the 1920s was partly the result of automaker mogul and celebrity Henry Ford's highly publicized interest in Old-time music and older forms of social dance. Inspired in part by Ford and the coverage of his obsession in the national press, Chattanooga fiddler, president of the Chattanooga Old Fiddlers' Association, and promoter J. H. Gaston saw an opportunity to generate greater local interest in

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the story I tell in this chapter is pulled from a collection of Chattanooga newspaper articles that were compiled over a number of years by Chattanooga musician Ken Parr. His diligent work with microfilm in the Hamilton County Library made this work possible.

<sup>2</sup> This localized interest in "old fiddling" and fiddle contests reflected a broader national interest in fiddle contests and related forms of dance during the 1920s. This ferment, combined with the tensions of an industrializing New South, made old fiddling a powerful symbol. Country Music historian Bill Malone points out that at the turn of the 20th century, the contests "became increasingly associated with Old Settlers' Days and Confederate reunions. Even at this early date, then, there seemed to be a recognition of fiddling both as an "old-time" art and a southern phenomenon as well as a community enterprise, and a means by which the 'New South' justified itself through an act of reverence for the old society that was passing away" (Malone 1997: 18). Librarian Paul Gifford sees the strong similarities between the way that Ford ran his Old-time music and dance campaign in the 1920s and the way he ran his anti-Semitic campaign a few years before. Both mass-media campaigns used newspapers and Ford dealerships to spread information (2010: 324). However, unlike his attempt to stir up anti-Semitic sentiment, the more subtly racist ideology of the Old-time fiddle and dance campaign gained traction in popular culture. Ford's intervention sparked an interest in the music in the 1920s, but old fiddling had appeared in the national press in earlier moments. South of Chattanooga in Atlanta, the Georgia Old Time Fiddlers' Association sponsored conventions from 1913-1935 and was covered in the local and national press a decade before Ford's efforts (Daniel 1980).

“old fiddling.” Stoking the fires of regional pride and using radio and newsprint to capture the public’s imagination, he instituted a fiddlers’ convention that lasted for nearly twenty years, petering out during WWII.

Fiddle contests had long been a form of community entertainment and a vital source of fundraising in communities throughout the South (Blaustein 1975, Cauthen 1989, Gifford 2010, Goertzen 2008, Malone 2010).<sup>3</sup> But when the Chattanooga Old Fiddlers’ Association staged their first large scale convention in March of 1926 in the new Memorial Auditorium, thousands came to hear fiddlers from Chattanooga and the surrounding region compete. Mass media, a developing regionally-focused recording industry, and the radio had facilitated the growth of the event and the large-scale engagement of local listeners with a commodity: Old-time music.

Over the course of the chapter, I track old fiddling and old fiddlers as they circulated and coalesced into the distinctly white genre of Old-time in 1920s Chattanooga—a booming, industrial southern city nicknamed “The Dynamo of Dixie.” In particular, I attend to representations of old fiddling and fiddlers in newspapers and printed advertisements intended for a white readership during the 1920s and early 1930s. Fiddlers’ conventions were newsworthy

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<sup>3</sup> Joyce Cauthen offers a detailed history of fiddle contests in Alabama. She notes: “Though contests were certainly held prior to 1900 in Alabama, they did not begin appearing in newspapers until after that date” (Cauthen 1989: 164). She includes an announcement for an “Old Fiddlers Convention” held in Jackson, Alabama, in 1903 that announces that “the old fiddlers of the county have consented to play for them” and lists those old fiddlers by name. Cauthen’s research reveals that the participants were indeed older people at the time of the event; many were born in the first half of the 19th century. Given the actual age of the participants, she suggests that the modifier “old” was likely meant to describe the fiddlers rather than the convention.

Cauthen sketches out the role of fiddlers’ conventions. They were held along with barbecues and fourth of July celebrations that included political speeches. “Old-time fiddlers’ conventions were more likely to be held under the auspices of such groups as the Woodmen of the World, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the American Legion, and the Ladies’ Missionary Society. By far the largest number of contests was sponsored by local parent-teacher organizations with the proceeds earmarked for the improvement of public education” (Cauthen 1989: 166). From the 1890s and into the 1930s, fiddlers’ conventions supplemented the budgets of local schools. My examination of Chattanooga newspapers shows that besides the Chattanooga Old Fiddlers’ Association, local events were sponsored by the Woodmen of the World, local schools, and women’s clubs. I found no events sponsored by the United Daughters of the Confederacy or the Ku Klux Klan in the newspapers I examined.

items in Chattanooga's white papers, the *Chattanooga News* and the *Chattanooga Times*, and resulted in a richly revealing trail of reportage. I chart the development of the first few conventions, but I am most interested in the ways that newspapers, promoters, and musicians represented old fiddling and Old-time—a peculiar admixture of newer and older music—to their neighbors.

What becomes clear is that even as old fiddling and the genre of Old-time were invented, performed, and consumed in print, over the new airwaves, on new shellac, and in a new, state-of-the-art auditorium, the music came to resonate as old, and this notion of oldness is inextricably tied to whiteness (Hale 1999, Roediger 1990). To be sure, old fiddling had other meanings and was likely a source of pleasure for its practitioners and enjoyment for listeners. However, I am interested in considering a different aspect of oldness that subtly take shape in media representations of the music. Chattanooga's white newspapers celebrated the fiddling as "old," representing it as a venerable, ancient white cultural practice. In doing so, they used this "old" music as a way to legitimize and historicize whiteness in this changing Southern city's contested public sphere (Brundage 2005). In Chattanooga, old fiddling, especially as it was represented in the newspapers, invoked and invited a celebration of whiteness, one formed from nostalgic (and at times contradictory) tropes of white Appalachia and the Deep South. I think of these representations of old fiddling, their consumption, and the activities they inspired as forms of collective memory creation for white Chattanoogaans. Collective memories are "ongoing processes, not possessions or properties," and, therefore, are contested and never definitive (Olick and Robbins 1998: 134; see also Brundage 2000, Zelizer 1995). In imagining the emergence of old fiddling from a "white pioneer meets plantation South" narrative, Chattanooga's newspapers presented white Chattanoogaans with a particular rosier and whiter

past in the face of major demographic and economic shifts that had reshaped the city over the prior decades. In the process, another kind of old fiddling was forgotten—the long history of black fiddling in America, dating to the 1700s (Epstein 1977, Jenoure 1981). In casting fiddling as “old,” white Chattanoogaans opened up the possibility of capitalizing on the opportunities new sound technologies promised them.

However, beneath the whitewashing of the newspapers, a more complicated story about African American contributions to the genre emerges. Although it comes almost a century after the fact, this chapter attempts to complicate and correct these earlier representations of the music by seeking out the presence of black musicians in the city’s musical life. Following the work of performance studies scholars Joseph Roach and Diana Taylor, I listen for counter histories in the embodied music making of Chattanooga’s old fiddlers (Roach 1996, Taylor 2003); in particular, I recover traces of African American musicians in the repertoires and the embodied musical practices of Jess Young—one of Chattanooga’s most celebrated old fiddlers. Exploring the circumstance that brought African American fiddler and recording artist Andrew Baxter to Chattanooga in the 1890s, I discover an unexpected old fiddler and weave another thread into historian Michelle Scott’s history of Black Chattanooga at the turn of the last century (Scott 2008). Likewise, I build on and contribute to the effort of other researchers to recover, document, and understand the fragmented history of African American fiddling traditions in Tennessee and in the broader U.S. (DjeDje 2016, Jamison 1988, Fulcher 1987, Jenoure 1981, Wells 2003, Winans 1990, Wolfe 1990). This chapter describes particular instances of musical exchanges (that were not necessarily even) across racial lines in the American South, adding another fold to earlier projects about these sorts of musical exchanges (Miller 2010, Russell 1970, Wells 2003). A musical style that embodied entangled black and white musical practices, Old-time was

represented as a form of older white culture in 1920s Chattanooga despite profound contributions of black musicians to the music.

## Part I: Old Fiddling in the Air and in the Paper

### WDOD “The Dynamo of Dixie”

A postcard from 1920s Chattanooga delivers an important message about a growing Southern city and invites a story of oldness mediated through radio. It depicts the “Hotel Patten: Chattanooga’s leading hotel” as an exceedingly modern and cosmopolitan hotel, located “where the highways meet.”<sup>4</sup> Arrows below the hotel point in the directions of major cities—New York, Chicago, Miami, Washington, D.C.—and link Chattanooga to worlds far beyond the South. Above the network of roads, broadcast antennas span the top of the eleven-story building, emitting 5,000 watts of power and sonically linking Chattanooga to far off places. The letters “WDOD” float above the wires in a wavy, electrified-looking script. As a form of mass



Figure 3 (above): Postcard of Hotel Patten, Chattanooga, Tennessee ca. 1920s (Hamilton County Public Library).

communication, radio in the U.S. had only been around for five years in 1925. Chattanooga’s

<sup>4</sup> Built in 1908, the hotel was the largest in the city and a source of pride. An editorial from the Chattanooga Times celebrated the grand opening of the new hotel as a crucial mark of Chattanooga’s growth: “The opening of the Patten hotel, admitted by all who have seen it to be the most elegant public house in all of its appointments to be found in any city in the South, is one of the important events in the history of Chattanooga. . . . For, in companionship with the James office building, it marks the transition of the big town to the modern city” (Chattanooga Times, 1 April 1908).

first radio station, WDOD was the latest in sound technology, coming on the air in April 1925. If the postcard's tag "where the highways meet" didn't deliver the message about Chattanooga's position as a booming, significant southern city, then the call letters WDOD—Dynamo of Dixie—broadcasted Chattanooga's sense of its role as an industrial hub in the New South.

Broadcasting from a swanky hotel in an industrialized Southern city, WDOD played a key role in generating public interest in old fiddling and allowing Chattanooga's to imagine connections with each other and as a community with distinct cultural practices rooted in their home. Through local papers and radio, the president of the Chattanooga Association of Old Fiddlers, J. H. Gaston, broadcast not only the sounds of old fiddling, but also messages about its meanings. On Monday night, January 11, 1926, Gaston invited listeners to "tune in" at 9:30 PM, when radio waves would travel farther. Listeners were invited to weigh in on the merits of local fiddler "Sawmill" Tom Smith's fiddling. Smith had recently been crowned the old fiddling champion after a much publicized contest and playoff in December 1925. Before the fiddling broadcast, the *Chattanooga Times* reports, Gaston had wired automaker Henry Ford the following message: "Henry Ford, Detroit, Mich.: Tune in on WDOD Monday night at 9:30 o'clock central time to receive official challenge of 'Sawmill' Tom Smith, East Tennessee fiddling champion, to Mellie Dunham for national honors. Also hear some real fiddling" (Henry Ford Will Hear "Sawmill" 1926).<sup>5</sup>

Delivered as an afterthought, Gaston's invitation to "hear some real fiddling" casts Tom Smith—Chattanooga's champion Old Fiddler—as the pinnacle of authenticity on the national

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<sup>5</sup> Librarian Paul Gifford (2010) notes that Henry Ford received a flood of these invitation to listen or attend old fiddle contests around the nation. Apparently, some contests, after failing to get Ford to attend, would hire a lookalike. It's also worth noting that old fiddling contests were being broadcast on other radio stations around the country. An Associated Press article in the *Chattanooga Times* reported that Jefferson City, Missouri, station WOS hosted an "old-time fiddlers' championship of the middle west" in early April of 1926 (Old Fiddlers Await 1926).

stage that Ford had created for fiddling. Radio provided a platform for Gaston to broadcast old fiddling and generate a sense of local pride in a national context. In his hands, old fiddling became a vehicle to claim regional superiority; he told a reporter on the morning before the first broadcast that “The best in everything comes from Tennessee. . . . The best soldier in the World war was Alvin York; the best singers, or two of the best, are Oscar Seagle and Homer Rodeheaver, and the best fiddler is ‘Sawmill’ Tom Smith” (Henry Ford Will Hear “Sawmill” 1926).<sup>6</sup>

It is unknown whether Ford tuned in or how many locals listened, but some listeners responded, writing the station and the newspapers and requesting that Gaston host an old fiddling contest on the air. He declined, presumably hoping that the broadcasts would whet listeners’ appetites for a much larger commercial endeavor later that spring. However, he did broadcast champion old fiddler and recording artists, Jess Young and his banjo playing brother Alvin in early February of 1926.<sup>7</sup> These broadcasts and breathless newspaper coverage set the stage for the large scale All Southern Fiddlers’ Convention event in March of the same year.

Prior to Gaston’s broadcasts in January and February 1926, old fiddling and associated forms of dance had burst into the national consciousness, sparked in large part by Henry Ford’s celebrity status and his vocal interest in old fiddling and social dance (Gifford 2010: 312). In late 1925, Ford’s proclamations about the greatness of Maine fiddler Mellie Dunham (1853-1931) gave old fiddling both a presence and a face in the national press. For Ford, the spirit of old fiddling was embodied in this white, old, rural, northern fiddler. If that weren’t enough, Dunham

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<sup>6</sup> Newspaper articles from the era reveal that women did participate in the contest. However, beyond a sentence or two and the brief mention of a name, they are less celebrated than male musicians, who were regarded as local celebrities.

<sup>7</sup> See (Fiddler Jess Young 1926).

fit notions of the folk, as he made his living with his hands, crafting snowshoes. National papers breathlessly covered the old fiddling champion Dunham's trip from rural Norway, Maine, to visit booming Detroit, Michigan—a trip that mirrored the transitions taking place in the modernizing nation as more Americans found their way into cities. Through his celebration of Dunham, Ford offered Americans a nostalgia-tinged vision of wholesome Americanness and the hope that even in the modern jazz moment, the past could be recovered and enacted through old music and dance. In the papers, Ford described his musical project as “an Americana of old-time dance tunes . . . in connection with his rejuvenations of the old time dances” (Mellie Dunham Is Champion 1925). After the rupture of World War I, he hoped that old fiddling and dance would foster forms of sociality, rooted in his memory of an earlier time: “I am trying in a small way to help America take a step, even if it is a little one . . . toward the saner and sweeter idea of life that prevailed in prewar days” (Fiddler “Mellie” Dunham 1925).<sup>8</sup> The story of Dunham, Ford, and his Americana resonated across the country during December of 1925 and led to a slew of old fiddling contests across the U.S. and Canada (Gifford 2010, Meade 1989: 37).

Back in Chattanooga, the press coverage stirred Gaston up. Taking issue with claims that a Northern fiddler was the greatest in the nation, Gaston was keen on finding a local fiddler to compete against Dunham. The response in Chattanooga reveals tensions and aspirations playing out in the city. In December 1925, before he had arranged the first WDOD broadcast of Tom “Sawmill” Smith's fiddling, the *Chattanooga Times* and the *Chattanooga Press* had run fourteen articles about Ford and Mellie Dunham. Entering into the fray, Gaston told the paper that the

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<sup>8</sup> The titles of related press coverage suggest the ways that reporters ascribed affective powers to old fiddling and dance. Here's a pair of headlines: “Fiddler ‘Mellie’ Dunham Makes Guests of Ford Feel a New Neighborliness” (Fiddler “Mellie” 1925) and “Ford's Ancient Fiddler to Make Detroiters Dream of the Days of Long Ago” (Ford's Ancient Fiddler 1925).



organization over which he served as chairman, the Chattanooga Old Fiddlers' Association, would host a fiddling contest "to select a player to beat the Yankee fiddler" (Will Challenge 1925). He announced an old fiddling contest to be held day after Christmas in the Chattanooga courthouse.

In response to Ford's national claims, Gaston rode the wave of interest to promote his own contest. He used Chattanooga's papers to circulate a localized history of old fiddling that claimed East Tennessee as its historical home and pandered to potential attendees' sense of southern pride; of Gaston, the *Times* reported: "He takes the view that since the first mountaineers, who furnished the music for 'breakdowns,' are reputed to have originated in the Tennessee hills, Mellie oughtn't to have no chance a-tall against such powerful array of native talent" (Will Challenge 1925). However, he was not only laying claim to "native talent" exemplified by "old fiddlers," but he was also celebrating "old fiddles." An expert would be on hand to examine fiddles and determine the oldest. The event, a rehearsal for a large scale fiddler's convention the following March, captured Chattanooga's imaginations. Attendees arrived at ten in the morning and listened to performances until four that afternoon, crowding the city's courthouse "to capacity" (Fiddlers Reach Fever Heat 1925). After several rounds of competition, four fiddlers were selected as potential contenders for Ford's fiddler Dunham. Gaston had succeeded in responding to the national old fiddling trend with a locally meaningful event, one that celebrated oldness and articulated old fiddling as a powerful expression of a white mountain South identity.

As reports of this initial December 1925 contest circulated in Chattanooga's papers, descriptions of old fiddling and the affective power of oldness circulated alongside them. The oldness of old fiddling fermented into a heady brew. In a flowery and poetic fit, a reporter

imagined the power of the music on listeners, hearing the past haunting the present: “Many old-time selections from the fiddlers stirred dormant memories of the past among the audience as haunting melodies filled the building, bringing back the almost forgotten airs of ‘Turkey in the Straw,’ ‘Arkansas Traveler,’ ‘Boil That Cabbage Down,’ ‘Cackling Hen’ and ‘Give the Fiddler a Drum [sic]” (Old-time Fiddlers Draw Big Crowd 1925).<sup>9</sup> In this reporter’s ears, the sounds of old fiddling transformed the physical site of official (white), legal power—the local courtroom—into a sonic and affective resonator in which white Chattanoogaans could celebrate the past and unearth “dormant memories.” But whose memories were unearthed, and to what end?

Enraptured by a longing for the oldness of the music, this reporter failed to acknowledge that by 1925 this very musical form was circulating widely in the growing commercial recording industry. Chattanoogaans like fiddler Jess Young were participating and benefiting from (or being exploited by) this industry, while local furniture stores were profiting from his musical labor. Not only was old fiddling commodified and circulating, but at that very moment, the industry was experiencing a radical change with the development of electric recording in 1925 which allowed for higher-fidelity sound recordings. Adapting their strategy of recording local musics in global and often colonial contexts to the domestic context, American recording companies created promising new markets and developed talent in the American South (Miller 2010). Old-time as a genre emerged in this commercial enterprise. Even as Old-time musicians drew omnivorously from newer sounds, record companies solidified it as old. Oldness was a sales strategy targeted at white listeners. Just as local music interfaced with national culture in Gaston’s convention, so

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<sup>9</sup> The notion of “almost forgotten airs” echoes early notions of folklore in the U.S. as the pursuit of fast vanishing remains. Also, it’s worth noting that “Turkey in the Straw” derived from the minstrel-era piece “Zip Coon,” which was published as sheet music in 1834.

also did the ostensibly old sounds mesh with new sound technologies in the realm of commercial recording. The commercial recording industry mediated and commodified oldness, selling the possibility to re-experience the past through the latest sound technologies.

Consider a Columbia record advertisement that *Chattanooga News* readers encountered earlier that year, in 1925 (Familiar Tunes 1925: an image of face-to-face music making in an era when sounds were not only being separated from their sources for repeated playback, but also turned into commodities (Schafer 1994).<sup>10</sup>

Anyone who is familiar with early country music and Old-time advertisements will recognize that there is nothing the least bit remarkable about this ad. It looks like ones that ran in countless other papers or in record label catalogs. And that

unremarkable quality—that generic invocation of “old familiar tunes that bring back fond recollections of your childhood days”—is exactly the point. These sorts of images of oldness were empty, vacant spaces into which consumers in Chattanooga, Atlanta, Birmingham, or wherever could project their sense of the past. Columbia eases its white consumers into something familiar and guarantees a recognizable past, what historian Jackson Lears might call



Figure 3 (above): Columbia Records advertisement from *Chattanooga News*, 1 May 1925, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Composer R. Murray Schafer (1994) names the separation of sounds from their sources as schizophonia. For him, it is symptomatic of modernity. However, these ads represent an odd inversion. Schizophonia, a sign of modernity in Schafer’s mind, becomes the pathway to encounter oldness, to recover a potentially pre-modern past through feelingful sound.

an “Anglo-folk utopia” (Lears 1988: 129).<sup>11</sup> They create a sonic product that promises to be the screen on which listeners can project their past. This ad and the score of others like it simultaneously imagine and recall a form of earlier sociality marked by down-home, face-to-face interactions. Of course, it is new sound technology that makes this time travel possible. The heavy-handed advertisement continues, in a celebration of technological newness: “The new Columbia is designed especially to reproduce these wonderful old songs. The new Columbia is the finest Phonograph ever built. Equipped with a powerful silent motor, automatic start and stop, new International Reproducer, encased in a beautiful cabinet, upright or console of genuine Walnut or Mahogany” (Familiar Tunes 1925).<sup>12</sup> The juxtaposition of an idyllic past and the latest technology, accessing the old through the new, is striking. The latest records of “old music” on the newest phonograph will, when consumed properly, transport listeners into old, mythic spaces. New sound technology mediates the meanings and experiences of oldness, just as oldness illuminates newness and facilitates its marketing.

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<sup>11</sup> Historian Jackson Lears gives a helpful history of the ways in which images of American folk were deployed in advertisements during this period. He points towards “a mild admixture of Anglo-Protestant nativism” and immigration restrictions passed in 1924. He astutely observes that “ethnocentric anxieties remained implicit but pervasive; they helped fuel the fascination with an imagined colonial past, and Anglo-folk utopia where blacks knew their place and immigrants were absent” (Lears 1988: 129). Although he sees these impulses leading towards expressions of Anglophilia, I believe the process and impulse took on a particular shape in Chattanooga. It seems fair to recognize the whiteness of these ads, and to consider the ways that they might have appealed to white Chattanoogaans who might be less concerned about a flood of southern European immigrants than the steadily growing African American community in Chattanooga. Their “Anglo-folk utopia” would have had a distinctive Southern flavor, likely drawing on an imagined antebellum past and some idealization of mountaineers.

<sup>12</sup> Record companies piggy-backed on Chattanooga’s fiddlers’ conventions, which were themselves thoroughly commercial affairs. Furniture stores ran specials on consoles during the week of fiddlers’ conventions. Others hosted star performers and Columbia Recording artists, promising consumers the latest sides and the chance to have the records signed. In this way, these contests intersected with larger commercial endeavors and suggest the contrast of professional musician and celebrity with community fiddler and neighbor. This is not to say that old fiddlers never benefited financially from their music—they did. They were and expected to be compensated for their musical labor even in the hyper-local context of house dances and community gatherings.

A discourse of oldness emerged in the lead up to Chattanooga's first All Southern Fiddlers' Convention in 1926. A local response to Henry Ford's national vision of the past, Chattanooga's oldness coalesced over the airwaves, on the newspaper page, in ads for records, in the grooves of 78 RPM records, and in a courthouse competition. It set the stage for a large scale public celebration of oldness in a brand new space. Between 1925 and 1930 in Chattanooga, older forms of media like the newspaper combined with new sound technologies and industries—the radio and a developing regional commercial recording industry—to make Old Fiddling conventions a prominent cultural practice among white Chattanoogaans. Mass media played a key role in circulating old fiddling as praxis, sound, and cultural meanings. It allowed Chattanoogaans to respond to the national attention to fiddle contests through the creation of a citywide event. In the realm of sound, the radio and an expanding commercial recording industry presented Chattanooga's listeners with radical new experiences, splitting familiar sounds from familiar performers. Music formerly known in the context of community dances and performances could now be consumed in novel, technologically-mediated ways. In one sense, old fiddling and Old-time could not have existed without new sound technologies.

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### **An Old Fiddling Reverie . . .**

*Pick the record up. Feel its heft—like a china dinner plate—surprisingly heavy for a disc of shellac ten-inches in diameter. Slide it out from the brown paper sleeve and place it on the gramophone. Look down at the round Black Columbia label with gold script. It's a "Viva-Tonal Recording." Trace the jagged script reading "Electrical Process." Grab hold of the crank, a smooth wooden cylinder attached by metal to the machine. The machine, a walnut Victrola console came from the furniture store on Seventh and Broad St.—Sterchi Bros. and Fowler,*

*where "It Costs Less." It's being paid down at a dollar fifty a week. Turn the crank, feel the resistance of the spring as it tightens inside. Slide the old needle out and slip a new one in. Lower the arm and the disc begins to spin. Open the little wooden doors below, and listen as the sound slips out and fills the room. It's that local old fiddler, Jess Young. "Oh! My Lawd." Let the reverie begin . . .*

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### **A Skip: On Oldness, Old Fiddling, and Whiteness**

Central to the meaning of whiteness is a broad, collective American silence. The denial of white as a racial identity, the denial that whiteness has a history, allows the quiet, the blankness, to stand as a norm. This erasure enables many to fuse their absence of racial being with the nation, making whiteness their unspoken but deepest sense of what it means to be an American. And despite, and paradoxically because of, their treasured and cultivated distinctiveness, southern whites are central to this nationalism of denial. (Hale 1999: xi).

A skip. A silence. A disruption. An erasure. In the newspaper, on the air, and on shellac, Gaston and the record companies were not merely hustling a musical form, its practitioners, or their instruments. Through old and new media they were pushing oldness as an aesthetic manifestation of whiteness. In this case, old fiddling was the particular cultural expression of a white past. As whites constructed and fetishized oldness and old fiddling, they also consolidated around a local identity, one that was distinct from yet vital to a broader nation. In Chattanooga, this identity took on a particular flavor: newspapers conjured up a mythic, white Southern space that (historical realities of Chattanooga be damned) was both pioneer and plantation, Appalachian and Deep South.<sup>13</sup> In embracing the discourse of the old, they were responding to a

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<sup>13</sup> Chattanooga's position in relation to the broader South is complex: 89 percent of city residents voted for secession (Groce 1999: 39); however, only 10 to 24 percent of Hamilton County residents voted for secession (Crofts 1989: 151). In 1860, enslaved people accounted made up between 10 and 25 percent of Hamilton County's population. Efforts to memorialize the Confederacy in what had been unionist East Tennessee were often lackluster, achieving limited traction in the region between Chattanooga and Knoxville and resulting in the erection of only

modernizing city and a growing African American presence within the city—a community that, against the odds of Jim Crow policies, was achieving small measures of social mobility (Scott 2008).<sup>14</sup> By embracing something they understood to be old, white, and local, they were responding to changes Northern investors had brought about in a New South city through foundries, steel mills, and factories. While the presence and influence of more visible institutions of whiteness like the United Daughters of the Confederacy were relatively subdued in Chattanooga (Groce 1999: 156-158), old fiddling served as a sonic monument to a faded white past as it marked public spaces through sound.

For some time, local white musical traditions had served as a point of pride and distinction for white Chattanoogaans. Writers made the case that the music of its white mountaineers was a truly American form of expression—a confirmation of white Chattanoogaans' status in the nation and an articulation of their difference from blacks. Most notably, in 1904 local poet and writer Emma Bell Miles suggested in the pages *Harper's Weekly* that the white musical traditions of the region were “real American music,” dismissing the sounds of black musicians as foreign and arguing that the mountaineers' music would be an ideal inspiration for an American classical tradition (Miles 1904). Even as she made her case, her journals reveal that

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seven monuments in the region (Groce 1999: 156-158). Historian Todd Groce explains, “During the period between 1896, when the first chapters [of the United Daughters of the Confederacy] were organized in Knoxville and Chattanooga, and the 1930s, a few chapters did attempt to mark soldiers' graves, place portraits of Confederate heroes in schools and libraries, and prepare rosters of soldiers from their communities, but many, especially those organized in the major urban areas during the First World War were mere social and civic clubs and quietly died out after a short time” (1999: 157).

<sup>14</sup> Oldness invites the white listener to cast the ear, eye, and imagination backwards, in hopes of satisfying a “desire for desire” (Stewart 2007: 23). Susan Stewart probes into longing and returns with a helpful riff on nostalgia: “By the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction the present is denied and past takes on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only through narrative. Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience. Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, the past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack” (ibid.)

those same white musicians, like her banjo playing brother-in-law, that she held up as pillars of authentic American music were making music and sharing repertoire with black musicians (see Miles 2014). Likewise, Ethel Park Richardson, a lesser known Chattanooga with an interest in local traditional music, also sought to hear some true strain of American music in white, Appalachian music, titling her 1927 compilation of songs “American Mountain Songs” (Richardson 1927). While Miles and Richardson lauded the pure Anglo traditions of their mountaineers as supremely American, they laid a discursive foundation on which the newspaper reporters of the 1920s could expand.

As celebrations of oldness moved off the page and onto the radio, into courtrooms, and into municipal auditoriums, they marked these spaces as white. Oldness served as a critique of the new, especially a new moment that saw a growing African American population. Oldness amplified whiteness and attenuated blackness. It gave white Chattanoogaans who were anxious about their position in a modernizing and diversifying city a sound to rally around. In Chattanooga, sounds of oldness could erect sonic monuments, elicit feelings, and, most importantly, incorporate new cosmopolitan spaces and markets into a narrative of the old and local (Brundage 2005). Using oldness to reconfigure the new, white southerners could ground themselves in the old and local as they faced and resisted what they perceived as the national and northern.

From the post-Reconstruction era into the 1920s, white Chattanoogaans claimed a regional exceptionalism, expressed in one city mayor’s claim that “Chattanooga is not a Southern nor a Northern city” (Scott 2008: 150). As a New South city, Chattanooga presented a public face that downplayed racial tensions, running advertisements in the 1880s that extended “a GENERAL INVITATION to all CARPET-BAGGERS” that assured northern investors “They will NOT BE



REQUIRED TO RENOUNCE THEIR POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS TENETS, as the jurisdiction of the KU KLUX [*sic*] and other vermin does not extend over these parts” (Scott 2008: 37-38). During the 1880s, Chattanooga also joined the Southern Immigration Association of America, which sought to attract European immigrants to the city (Scott 2008: 38). On the face of things, these gestures suggest an openness to difference among Chattanooga’s white leaders; however, when viewed alongside a rapidly growing African American population in the city, they suggest an attempt to maintain a white majority, even if it required a more expansive definition of whiteness (e.g., an openness to southern Europeans).<sup>15</sup>

Like other southern cities of the time, Jim Crow was the rule and segregation restricted the movements and lives of the city’s black population—a population that in 1910 represented just over forty percent of Chattanooga’s population of 44,604 residents (Scott 2008: 166). Beyond the subtle everyday violence of a Jim Crow southern city, Chattanooga witnessed two spectacles of racial violence with the murder of Alfred Blount in 1893 and Ed Johnson in 1906 (Lynched 1893). In both acts of racial terror, white murderers killed black men, hanging them on the Walnut Street bridge that crosses the Tennessee River and links Hill City—a black neighborhood on the north bank of the river—to downtown Chattanooga on the south bank. The murder of Ed Johnson thrust the city into the national spotlight; after the U.S. Supreme Court issued a stay of execution, a mob of white Chattanoogaans murdered Ed Johnson (Curriden 1999). Although official narratives celebrate Chattanooga’s alignment with Unionist politics during the Civil War and its moderate politics as a New South city, the city’s rhetoric does not align with

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<sup>15</sup> Michelle Scott ascribes the demographic shifts in the late 1800s to a number of factors, especially demands for labor: “Overall, between 1870 and 1890 a total of 10,432 African Americans resettled in the area. . . . In 1890, African Americans were approximately 43 percent of the Chattanooga population and 33 percent of Hamilton County’s population” (Scott 2008: 39).

the everyday realities of its black citizens. It was not immune to the racism and violence that shaped the broader South and nation.

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### **An Old Fiddling Reverie Disturbed**

*The record has a scratch, a flaw that interferes with its playback. The mind swirls back into the parlor. You curse the console. And then there's the records—that shellac scratches easily. Get up, shuffle across the parlor rug, and lift the arm. So much for Viva-Tonal records. The record spins silently below. The idyll is disrupted. The reverie ends.*

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## **Part II: Old Fiddling in the Body**

### **Jess Young's Bodily Archive**

What's muffled in the discursive realm is rendered audible in the bodily realm. Consider the repertoire and musical practice of old fiddling champion Jess Young (1883-1938), dubbed "The Pride of Chattanooga." It would be fair to say that Young was the embodiment of old fiddling in 1920s Chattanooga. However, although he was an icon of old fiddling, the reality of his music making, captured in the techniques and repertoire documented on shellac records, challenges representations of old fiddling as white cultural practice. To tell the story of Jess Young is also to tell the story of an African American musician named Howard Barnes.

Tracking from the discursive realm of oldness into the bodily realm of Young's music-making reveals techniques, motions, and musical, bodily knowledge that oldness muffles. Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor invites us to consider the counter histories embedded in "embodied practices" (2003: 20), as we direct attention from the "archive" to the "repertoire"—a shift "from written to embodied culture, from the discursive to the performatic"

(Taylor 2003: 16). Likewise, Joseph Roach invites us to consider “genealogies of performance” as a way to “attend to ‘counter memories,’ or the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences” (Roach 1996: 26). Thus, we cut through the static of oldness and whiteness by turning our attention from the visual realm of the newspaper and advertisement to the realm of embodied musical practices, performances, and repertoires. Reframing old fiddling in terms of Taylor’s embodied “repertoire” reveals stories of musical exchanges across racial lines (2003).<sup>16</sup>

At the most basic level, Young’s recorded performances (and his acknowledgement of his black musical inspirations challenge representations of old fiddling as a white practice and link to black musicians (see Hartman 1981). In



*Figure 4 (above): Jess Young and his fiddle "Old Rat" (from author's collection)*

April 1925, Young and his band traveled to Richmond, Indiana, and recorded five sides for Gennett (Wolfe 1981: 52). He and his bandmates learned three of the five Gennett pieces from black musicians around Chattanooga. A decade before this recording session, between 1912 and

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<sup>16</sup>Another old fiddler from Chattanooga—the 1928 All Southern Champion and fellow Columbia recording artist—Bob Douglas (1900-2001) told another revealing story: “Now I had a friend, a black man that I got acquainted with in Chattanooga, and he was a good guitar picker, picked the blues on there, and I always liked that. And he was a stomp down foot buck dancer. I took him out on the Mountain with me one time out there. You know he was kind of scared to go there. And I told him, ‘Them people out there is all my friends, they won’t bother you.’ And he went out there with me, and they was just tickled to death to have him out there. That was way back, I hadn’t been playing long then. I hadn’t played on the fiddle at all. So I took him out there and he stayed two or three days with us. And I picked up right smart off of him. Kind of that lick on the guitar, you know. And he couldn’t play after a fiddle, and I learned him how to play rhythm. I love the blues they play on the guitar” (Fulcher 1990: 10). This exchange most likely took place between 1917 and 1928.

1914, Young and his band played on showboats and traded licks and tunes with African American musicians downstream from Chattanooga in the Tennessee River gorge (Wolfe 1981). It was likely there that Young struck up an acquaintance with a black guitar player named Howard Barnes. Barnes went on to shape Young's recorded output and help make him an old fiddling champion. A handful of Young's most popular repertoire pieces came through his connection to Barnes. Young named his country rag "Maybelle Rag," after a solo rag guitar piece he learned from Barnes' black friend May Lee Bell (ibid.) His breakdown "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster Crowed"—the piece that would make him the All Southern champion in 1927—came out of this same black social and musical network.<sup>17</sup> A fiddler named May Lee taught him this sophisticated setting of "Old Hen Cackled" with highly syncopated bowing and a propulsive extra part that modulates from the key of G to C (Hartman 1981: 35).<sup>18</sup> On the flipside of that release was "Down in Tennessee Blues," a three-finger solo banjo piece that bandmate Homer Davenport claimed to have pulled from the repertoire of fellow Chattanooga and Empress of the Blues, Bessie Smith (Wolfe 1981: 54). Young's recorded output and the techniques documented tell a different story about the history and inspiration of old fiddling than the story that circulated in the newspapers.

Unable to continue working in the nearby coal mines because of respiratory issues (possibly black lung), Jess Young plied his trade as a professional musician in 1920s Chattanooga. During this time, he explored the commercial possibilities of the genre and made

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<sup>17</sup> Young's rendition of May Lee's version rolls along the expected route, employing technically refined bowing techniques. Tension builds in the key of G. Seventy-two seconds into the performance the piece modulates, bursting into the key of C with a new part. This shift propels a familiar tune into unfamiliar places. After ten seconds building tension, the piece descends back down to G and Young plucks his E string in a syncopated rhythm that matches the bob of a strutting chicken's head or a barrage of clucks. It is a showpiece.

<sup>18</sup> It is unclear if May Lee Bell and May Lee were the same musician.

innovative records with rhythmically tight, professional bands. His pairing of “Bill Bailey, Won’t You Please Come Home” and “Are You from Dixie” was one of Columbia’s top fifteen country records in 1928, selling 31,800 copies (Wolfe 1981: 55).<sup>19</sup> Combining two Tin Pan Alley pieces, a 1902 sheet music ragtime piece that would become a jazz classic with Jack Yellen and George Cobb’s 1915 “Are You from Dixie?,” Young created a marketable sound that drew on familiar tropes of race and white southern identity. As Young achieved professional success, he continued to pull from the pieces he learned from and played with black musicians. His late 1920s Columbia recordings tapped back into Howard Barnes’ music making and repertoire, notably Barnes’ “Oh! My Lawd” and bluesy piece “The Old K-C” (Wolfe 1981). In Chattanooga during the late 1920s, as all of these sounds and sources converged under the rubric of old fiddling, black and white musical styles overlapped in complex ways.

In spite of the claims of Gaston and reporters, old fiddling was neither a pure expression of white East Tennessee’s creativity nor some blending of old South and mountain south. Instead, it was musical knowledge produced by bodies that summarized lived histories and exchanges that crossed racial and social boundaries. There was a range of sounds and sources, some old, some new, some Southern, some Northern, some black, and some white. For Young, old fiddling drew deeply on bodily musical knowledge from blacks. In the 1920s champion, old fiddlers in Chattanooga were incorporating African American musical repertoire and techniques into their performances even as their performances were being cast as a bastion of white southern tradition.

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<sup>19</sup> By the time Young waxed “Bill Bailey,” it had been a part of black street performance in Chattanooga for at least a decade. Chattanooga Will Johnson recalled a young Bessie Smith performing the song on the streets of Chattanooga during the early 1900s: “‘She used to sing ‘Bill Bailey, Won’t You Please Come Home?,’ and whenever someone threw a fat coin her way, she’d say something like ‘That’s right, Charlie, *give* to the church’” (Albertson 2003 [1972]: 8). Her brother Andrew accompanied her on guitar.

## Old Fiddler Andrew Baxter and the East 9th Street Blues

Andrew Baxter's transitory and ephemeral sojourn in Chattanooga illustrates the challenges of documenting the influence of African American musicians on the old fiddling scene in Chattanooga. Two years before Jess Young's Tennessee Band recorded "The Old K-C" for Columbia in April 1929, an African American fiddler named Andrew Baxter had recorded a much more languid, loping setting for Victor. Baxter called it the "K.C. Railroad Blues."<sup>20</sup> Baxter and his guitar playing son Jim's recorded repertoire skillfully navigates between blues pieces and breakdowns, veering towards the bluesier and raggier numbers. Baxter himself called Chattanooga home during the 1890s and early 1900s. However, unlike the celebrated history of Chattanooga's white fiddlers, Baxter's presence in the city is tucked away in yellowed city directories, census records, and the memories of his neighbors. His story sheds light on the influx of African Americans in Chattanooga at the turn of the last century. A critical story of old fiddling, it also points towards the demographic changes and racial tensions that oldness sought to address.

Baxter's story begins in rural Redbud, Georgia, in Gordon County, some fifty miles south of Chattanooga and seventy miles north of Atlanta in the tumultuous post-Civil War moment. Born in 1869, Andrew Baxter grew up during Reconstruction. As Reconstruction ended in the late 1870s, white southerners scrambled to reestablish social and political power, employing strategies of intimidation and terrorism. Acts of racially motivated terrorism and spectacles of violence placed many southern, rural blacks in precarious positions and led them to seek safety

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<sup>20</sup> Baxter's role in an early integrated recording session has been well-documented (Daniel 1990: 77, Miller 2010, Russell 1970, Wiggins 1987). In the same August 9, 1927, Victor session in Charlotte, North Carolina, Baxter fiddled the "G Rag" with the white Old-time stringband the Georgia Yellowhammers. Paul Wells offers a helpful overview of black performers in Old-time recording sessions (Wells 2003).

in black enclaves in southern cities.<sup>21</sup> A story circulating in Baxter's community about a childhood incident hints at the kinds of experiences of racial violence that would cause rural blacks to move to cities. Baxter's former neighbor Mae Conner tells the story:<sup>22</sup>

Well, Andrew was just a boy, he started out 'possum hunting one night. And Andrew told us this hisself. And he heard horses, and said the first thing he knowed, "Horses was all around me." He said, "I couldn't walk for 'em."

And they kept giving him the reins to hold. They was about to render justice on somebody that hadn't done right. And they give him all them reins to hold.

And he said, "I had my double handful, like this." And he said, "I kept working them horses till I got 'em turned around with their head this way, and then back in that way." And then he said, "I dropped them reins, and lit out through them woods."

And he said when he got home, his mother said, "Andrew, what in the world's the matter?"

And he said, "Ku . . ." That's all he could say, was "Ku . . ."

The next day he seen the man that was the head of it on the road. You know, there used to be people gathered up, and they worked the road. And he told Andrew, he said, "You ain't no good at all holding horses."

Andrew said, "I knowed right then who he was."

He was getting away from that! He said, "I didn't want no part of *that!*" (Conner 2004)

During the 1880s and 90s, precarity and vulnerability marked the life of Andrew Baxter and many other rural, southern blacks.

In 1894, by the time he was twenty-five, Andrew Baxter had made his way to Chattanooga. He boarded on Short Street in the St. Elmo neighborhood, on the side of Hawkins

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<sup>21</sup> See Scott (2008) for a history of this demographic shift in Chattanooga.

<sup>22</sup> Mae Conner was a white neighbor of Baxter's from when he lived in Calhoun, Georgia. According to her interviewers, folklorist Wayne Martin and record collector Marshall Wyatt, she and her nephew Deacon Ballieu visited with Baxter and told a number of his stories (Martin 2017). Whether the story is true is less significant than the fact that it circulates in the white community as a way of remembering the threats that black neighbors faced in the wake of Reconstruction.

Ridge in the shadows of Lookout Mountain, and worked a job with the Chattanooga Electric Light Company. Over the next decade, he supported his wife and three children, digging graves for white bodies in the nearby Forest Hills Cemetery. The historical record is silent as to any music that he may have made in Chattanooga for his own enjoyment or to supplement his income. By 1910, Baxter had returned to Georgia where he farmed, worked as a blacksmith, played music, and continued to work as a gravedigger.

Chattanooga's booming industries—foundries, steel mills, factories—and the demands for unskilled labor drew Andrew Baxter and thousands of black southerners into the city during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The city's black population doubled between 1870 and 1880 (Scott 2008: 39). During the 1890s, Baxter was one of 12,563 black Chattanoogaans, representing forty three percent of the city's population (Scott 2008: 39). Some white Chattanoogaans diagnosed this influx of rural blacks as problematic: a city tour guide, published in 1889, described the city's "negro problem" and wistfully claimed that "within fifty years the negro will be as infrequent in the valleys of Chattanooga and Lookout as he now is in the valley of the Genessee [sic] in New York" (Scott 2008: 49). In spite of this racist fantasy and the realities of segregation, members of Chattanooga's black community rose above the limited opportunities of unskilled labor and, by the early 1900s, owned factories, businesses, and newspapers (Scott 2008: 51). In 1904, one visitor reported to a national newspaper: "This much can be said of the business Negroes of Chattanooga, that they rank head and shoulder with those of any city of similar size in the country" (Scott 2008: 51). Segregation had created a demand for black businesses and had also focused the black community into particular spaces within the city.

One of the most vibrant space in black Chattanooga during the late 1800s and into the 1930s was East Ninth Street (what has now been renamed Martin Luther King Boulevard). On



the edge of white downtown and brimming with black businesses, churches, restaurants, saloons, and theaters, East Ninth Street was the social, commercial, and cultural center of Chattanooga's African American community. A black neighborhood radiated outward a few blocks on either side. Apparently, even Andrew Baxter thought East Ninth Street was special. On a Victor recording session ledger from an Atlanta session in October of 1928, we find where Andrew and Jim Baxter took three passes at recording a bluesy vocal number, the "East 9th Street Blues" (Discography of American Historical Recordings 2018). Although the piece was unreleased and is lost to time, its presence recalls the way that one of Chattanooga's old fiddlers, excluded from Chattanooga's whitewashed narrative of old fiddling, used his music to celebrate the city's growing black community. Baxter's fiddling memorialized a happening social and cultural scene in Chattanooga's growing black community. Through the early 1900s into the 1920s, black Chattanoogaans had radically transformed the city's demographics and unsettled whites in a city that had been pro-Union and not particularly invested in the institution of slavery. A New South city that had welcomed northern investors and their factories found the presence of unskilled black labor to be unsavory and problematic. It was in this moment of change that a very visible, vibrant, and socially stratified black culture was made visible and audible in the sights and sounds of Chattanooga's East Ninth Street.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Bessie Smith biographer and historian Michelle Scott summarizes the ways late 19th Century migration led to Chattanooga white Democrats consolidating power and implementing Jim Crow laws: "Ultimately, migration was yet another occurrence that prompted many white Chattanoogaans to officially weaken African American access to political power and social equality, which resulted in the creation of an African American community very much removed from the white community" (Scott 2008: 54). Because of and in spite of this exclusion and denial of power, black Chattanoogaans built their own city within the city, socially stratified and complete with the businesses and services needed to function.

### **Part III: Old Fiddling on the Stage**

#### **A New Space for Old Fiddling**

Roughly two decades after Andrew Baxter had left Chattanooga, old fiddling was on the air, on records, in the newspaper, and on the stage. In March of 1926, J.H. Gaston held the first All Southern Fiddlers' Convention two blocks north of East 9th Street in the recently constructed state-of-the-art Memorial Auditorium. Old sounds would fill this new, modern space.

*Chattanooga News* correspondent John Fort's offered a sonically attuned report from March 9, 1926, about the first All Southern Fiddlers' Convention:

The last high notes of Mary Garden doubtless still flutter around on golden wings in the auditorium. The baton of the orchestra leader no longer signals the imported musicians who made the rafters ring. The music of Verdi and Bizet is stilled and gone. The memories of the gowns and the dress suits still cling around the boxes.

There is a new kind of music in the Memorial auditorium. It is the thin, jerky rhythm of the violin, unaccompanied with the throbbing of the drums and the wailing of the saxophone. A group of "country folks" are on the stage. The dress suits are gone, the opera gowns are back in moth balls. The "old fiddlers" of three states are in convention and are showing their wares. They will leave tonight after they play for a big square dance at the Memorial. Perhaps every musician of note would enter into the auditorium and turn his nose to heaven and his thumbs to the basement. All of the Europeans who have studied under the great masters would utter a chorus of "boos." All Americans who have been trained in the music of the foreign world would join the chorus of anathemas. For it is jig music that these "old fiddlers" are playing. They sound all much alike in tempo. It takes a special kind of musical ability to distinguish "Cackling Hen" from "Old Granny Hare." . . .

For American they are, and not half a dozen men on the stage, who are in the contest, have any idea of the origins of the tunes they play or who wrote them. The reason is that they have been handed down from father to son by men who did not know one written word of music, or perhaps could neither read nor write. But they are very old and go back to the early days of American history, and perhaps are truly the music of our part of the world. (Fort 1926)

Fort's reporting expresses the tensions between Chattanooga's cosmopolitan aspirations, embodied in the recently constructed Memorial Auditorium (a memorial to the first "modern" war), and the display of rurality on the stage during the first All Southern Fiddlers' Convention. For this reporter, the presence of old fiddlers in a new, specially designed symbol of

Chattanooga's rising status requires explanation. Questions of taste, based in notions of class, shape his description, leading him to assume the role of an apologist. His defense of old fiddling as rural and classed sounds relies on binaries: domestic/foreign, rural/urban, earthy/gilded, overalls/opera gowns. As he rehashes tropes about the supreme Americanness of the old fiddlers, he echoes Chattanooga's Emma Bell Miles and Ethel Park Richardson (Miles 1904, 1975 [1905]; Richardson 1927). Oldness is, in Fort's estimation, Americanness. Ears "trained in the music of the foreign world" will not appreciate it. It goes without saying that Fort and his readers understood that this exemplary old expression of Americanness was white. For Fort, who seems tepid about the actual fiddling, it is this localized expression of oldness—an authentic expression and relic of white American culture—that gives it value. Its face-to-face transmission only adds to its rustic American significance. Whether Fort's defense of these sounds holds up, there is no denying the fact that Gaston filled a new space with the sounds and celebration of oldness. Thousands of listeners came to hear the old fiddlers and to root for their local practitioners.

As unlikely a space for these events as it may seem to have been, the brand new Memorial Auditorium, which symbolically represented Chattanooga's arrival in modern society, hosted a slew of old fiddlers over the next decade. A monument to World War I casualties, the auditorium was built between 1922 and 1924 with \$700,000 in funds raised by the city (New Auditorium is Best in South 1924). Chattanooga-based architect Ruben Hunt, whose work can be seen in churches and municipal buildings throughout the South, designed the Greco-Roman auditorium to fulfill a range of needs in a growing city, from concerts to conventions.<sup>24</sup> Like the contemporary architecture of Chattanooga's Patten Hotel, with its WDOD broadcasting antenna, the boxy Greco-Roman Memorial Auditorium had little to do with any local architectural

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<sup>24</sup> Hunt's buildings were a kind of modern mass produced architecture. Certain designs show up in different places, a kind of mix-and-match combination of civic-looking structures.

precedents. However, unlike the modern hotel, the auditorium's architect invoked the cosmopolitan by reaching into an ancient white past (e.g., a Greco-Roman design). The auditorium could host 5,408 listeners. A former city mayor, T.C. Thompson, envisioned it as a key site in Chattanooga's civic life: "These halls should become the gathering place for all civic discussions and should be the Mecca of those who desire to prosper a wholesome community spirit, without which we are indeed poor. As a civic shrine and community center this memorial will become indeed a living and lasting monument" (Lay Cornerstone of New Auditorium 1922). The *Chattanooga Times* celebrated the new space, noting that "it will be a big factor in promoting the city's growth and will be the means of furnishing unending entertainment" (New Auditorium is Best in South 1924). The city even purchased a great pipe organ, which gives an indication of the kind of entertainment that would happen there.

Newspaper reports locate the auditorium in discourses of modern technology, describing the role of engineers, "data," "marvel of mechanical skill," and quantifying all the materials used in construction (ibid.) Like the radio and recording industry, the acoustically designed auditorium featured the latest in sound technology (or at least the latest that had made its way to places like Chattanooga). The social meaning of the new space as a space for audition—quiet, attentive, and worshipful modern listening—was clearly expressed in the newspaper reporter's reaction to the crude sounds of the old fiddlers in this refined space (Thompson 2002). Nevertheless, just as it had done with the new radio station, old fiddling repurposed the auditorium that signified Chattanooga's arrival as a modern city.

Convention organizer J. H. Gaston recognized that holding the old fiddling contest in the new space would bring a higher profile to his celebration of old fiddling, and, in doing so, would transform this new auditorium into a temple of oldness in which the modern was anathema.

Before the first event, Gaston painstakingly laid out criteria of oldness to guide the first large-scale contest in March of 1926, drawing a sharp distinction between the present and the past. The *Chattanooga News* reported his rule that “No ‘modern’ fiddlers or violinists will be admitted; that is, fiddlers who can read music. The rhythm will be created strictly by ear interpretation” (Tristate Fiddlers’ 1926). He differentiated old fiddling from the modern by how it was learned. Old fiddling came through the ear rather than eye. Another article echoed and expanded this notion: “The fiddlers will play nothing but the old dance tunes. . . . any knowledge of music will eliminate the contestant” (Old Fiddlers’ Frolic 1926). This perplexing statement about musical knowledge relegates old fiddling into some other realm of knowledge or skill, somewhere that exists beyond the orbit of official categories of music or musical knowledge.<sup>25</sup> In this

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<sup>25</sup> This distinction between fiddling and other forms of musical knowledge was not new: it can be found in the colonial era in a 1736 *Virginia Gazette* announcement about a fiddle contest. Fort’s linking of old fiddling to the “early days of American history” does, in fact, have some historical basis and his distinction between “country folks” performing old fiddle music and “every musician of note” is not without historical precedent. The *Virginia Gazette* reports two fiddle contests in Hanover County, Virginia, in 1736 and 1737. These early newspaper articles make a distinction between fiddling and other types of music that persisted into 1920s’ articles about fiddle contests. As one of the earliest mentions of a southern fiddle contest—perhaps the earliest mention of a fiddle contest in what became the U.S., the paper hints that its readers would have distinguished between the official, studied world of music and the unofficial, rustic world of fiddling. The *Virginia Gazette* published the following invitation for a St. Andrew’s Day celebration:

. . . on Tuesday next, (being St. Andrew's 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, sp (to wit,) A neat Hunting Saddle, with a fine Broad-cloth Housing, fring'd and flower'd &c. to be run for (the Quarter,) by any Number of Horses 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 Stockings to be given to the handsomest Maid upon the Green, to be judg'd of by the Company. (*Virginia Gazette*, 26 November 1736)

Like the reporter in Chattanooga describing the distinction between the “country folks” and “musicians of note” at the All Southern Fiddlers’ Convention, this invitation for “Country Fiddlers” to compete and the exclusion of “Mr. Langford’s Scholars” suggest that organizers distinguished between the music that Country Fiddlers and that Langford’s scholars made. But who was Mr. Langford? In the January 7, 1737, *Virginia Gazette*, tucked below an article describing a smallpox remedy, we discover that Mr. John Langford, “a noted and skillful Musician,” succumbed to illness on Christmas Eve (*Virginia Gazette*, 7 January 1737). Perhaps Langford, his music, and his students occupied a different, more urbane position than the country fiddlers. On St. Andrew’s Day the following year, the paper invited “20 Fiddlers” to compete for another fiddle, and “After the Prize is won, they are all to play together, and each a different Tune” (*Virginia Gazette*, 7 October 1737). It is difficult to determine what connotations terms like “country fiddler” and “musician” carried in 1730s Virginia. However, this early example suggests both that fiddle contests have a long history in the cultural landscape of the American South and that in the

formulation, oldness suggests ways of knowing and making music that do not involve familiar forms of musical literacy but involve bodily knowing. For something to be vanishing, its modes of transference ought to be tenuous, archaic, and immaterial.

Beyond the efforts to celebrate whiteness, oldness emerged as an aesthetic about both learning and performance.

In the lead-up to first convention in the spring of 1926, the quest for oldness intensified: the newspapers sought to pique their readers interest in the old fiddling event, promising them an experience of the past in the present. Just a few days before the first All Southern Fiddlers' Convention in early March of 1926, the *Chattanooga News* drove the oldness of the music home, employing a seemingly innocuous sentimental trope—the aged, dwindling numbers of Confederate veterans doddering into the twilight—that would have been familiar to white readership. In a feat of fevered journalistic poetry, the reporter likens old fiddling to the Lost Cause:

Eulogies have been sung to the passing art of fiddling, veritable epitaphs have been prescribed and as the gray horde of Confederate veterans were once so in profusion, the tunes that once filled the frontiersman's log cabin from puncheon floor to rafters, the resonant cowhide boots of the men and the swish of the linsey woolsey skirts of the women has been given a demise. An *au revoir* has been sounded by the old folks as the fiddlers have seemed to pass, but the good-by was unwarranted. Old fiddling is coming back. (Fiddlers Ready 1926)

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early 18th century distinctions between fiddling and other types of music making were in play. Fiddling was a marked category of music. In spite of the nostalgic impulses shaping Fort's 1926 article, his claim of the old Americanness of fiddle music rings true. What is also true is that the *Virginia Gazette* ran several advertisements for enslaved black people who were described as fiddlers, forcing us to recognize that old fiddling was never a purely white cultural practice.

Notions of the music's oldness also circulated in the academic discourse of the early 20th century as well. Consider Louise Rand Bascom's observation from a 1909 *Journal of American Folklore* article, describing a fiddlers' convention in nearby Western North Carolina: "The tunes are very old. One fiddler, aged ninety-four, states that he is playing his great-grandfather's 'pieces'" (Bascom 1909: 239). Bascom, who seems as interested in the exoticism of her mountain fiddlers' conventions as she does in the music, highlights the long history of the music.

The reporter collapses time into a murky, imagined past out of which old fiddling emerges. He constructs a nostalgic white world of music—pioneers, and old fiddle tunes vanishing like old Confederate veterans, obscuring the actual histories of musical exchange helped make an old fiddler like Jess Young sound the way he did.

By 1926, old fiddling as a musical category and old fiddlers' conventions became a source of identity and had subtle (and not so subtle) racial resonances. At the time, old fiddling, old fiddling conventions, and old fiddlers were promoted as a white southern cultural form. The events were understood to be white enough that organizations like the United Daughters of the Confederacy and Ku Klux Klan would sponsor them and use them as fundraisers in other parts of Tennessee and the broader South. As much as notions of an old America shaped representation of old fiddling, the processes of collective memory and identity creation added a subtle and pernicious layer of racial meaning to old fiddling as it circulated in 1920s Chattanooga. The synthesis of place and the invocation of memory linked the musical practice to an imagined Southern that blended tropes of the Old South and Appalachia. This articulation of old fiddling effectively erased black musicians, repertoires, and musical practices from the record. As the papers imagined them, old fiddlers were white and valiantly bore a venerable tradition in the face of modernity.

## **Conclusion**

After the first All Southern Fiddlers' Convention drew thousands of attendees, a controversy (or publicity stunt) erupted before a convention in January 1927. The question of what constituted oldness was at the heart of it. Taking the issue to the papers, local fiddler

“Sawmill” Tom Smith accused recording star and ace fiddler for the Georgia Skillet Lickers, Clayton McMichen, of being a modern fiddler: “McMichen resins [sic] his bow all over, while a real old fiddler only puts resin [sic] on four or five inches” (Tennessee Champ Refuses 1927). The next day, the papers ran McMichen’s lengthy refutation, including a claim of being both an old fiddler and an American: “I’m a full-blown American and I haven’t got any feathers on my legs, and I haven’t got any crawfish about it at all, with all due respect to Mr. Smith” (ibid.) Even in blustery jokes, fiddling becomes a way to claim identity and serves as a sign of full membership in white America.

As these scuffles over the aesthetics and meanings of Old-time music circulated in the newspaper, they drew good crowds to the All Southern Fiddlers’ Convention and other local conventions. If the newspapers reported accurately, the contests drew thousands of overall-clad attendees to the Memorial Auditorium from 1926 until the mid-1930s. Newspaper coverage suggests that these were significant events for the community, and that oldness continued to be the draw.<sup>26</sup> Square dances almost always followed, and the reporters describe old-fashioned dances without any of the new-fangled new steps or stylings. Attendees became participants in oldness. At times, the stage would be converted into a rustic scene, with hay bales brought into the new auditorium. When the audiences were described, they were active, tapping their feet in time, patting rhythms, and responding boisterously to rousing performances, listening in a way that rejected the worshipful, attentive forms of listenership that became common during the early 20th century (Thompson 2002). Some early contests were even judged by the loudness of their applause. In sum, these conventions offered attendees a particular kind of listening experience in

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<sup>26</sup> In many moments, the reporting about these events feels a bit stock—they rarely list more than a repertoire of five or six tunes. Or perhaps, from my position as a member of the contemporary Old-time world, I may value the archaic and miss the fact that Columbia was attempting to sell the “old familiar tunes.”



which notions of the old were celebrated, even if they were experienced in the space of a new auditorium.

For white Chattanoogaans (and other white southerners), the celebration of old fiddling became a sanctioned enactment of collective memory, not unlike the monument building efforts of voluntary organizations during the same period or the Confederate veterans conventions of the late 19th century (Brundage 2005). As a production of collective memory of the dominant white society in Chattanooga, old fiddling subtly whitewashed a complex musical form, imagining it to be an old Anglo-Saxon tradition, a sign of Chattanooga's Appalachian identity, and a sign of its membership in a broader, white South. Thus, it is no surprise that organizations that sought to memorialize a white, patriarchal, and historical (imagined) South. Nevertheless, the musical practices of the old fiddlers who were esteemed as links to this imagined white past, especially in Chattanooga, reveal the indelible marks of their exchanges with black musicians. This regional meaning and identity dovetailed with a broader understanding of old fiddling conventions and were understood as an indication of true (white) Americanness. It represented a layered invention and celebration of heritage.

Beyond the ways old fiddling was deployed to consolidate and memorialize white history and power, the oldness of old fiddling dictated particular modes of listening and learning for Jazz Age Chattanoogaans. Newspaper reporters instructed their readers to particular ways of listening. Old fiddling, insisted the reporters, was to be consumed as feelings rather than as an art object worthy of dispassionate engagement. In their writing, the bodies of auditors are often described as being engaged in feelingful listening: listeners pat time with their feet or whoop with excitement. Just as the listener's body is foregrounded, so also are the musicians' bodies. Descriptions of musical learning in newspapers describe the older ways that music is learned (i.e.

not through the rationalized, ocularcentric written music). Instead it arrives through mysterious forms of bodily mimesis. Likewise, it is performed with a certain set of “older,” more primitive techniques (i.e. shorter bow strokes) rather than the refined, trained bow of a classical musician. Along the way, the masters of these old techniques were engaging with the latest sound technologies—the radio, records, and a new auditorium. Even if advertisements for Chattanooga’s Columbia Old-time recording artists celebrated new electric recording technologies and higher fidelity, they still invited listeners to engage the past through the consumption of electrically recorded, old music. As the genre coalesced in Chattanooga, Old-time music was imbricated with new technologies even as it proclaimed temporal distance from the era that gave rise to those same technologies.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR OLDNESS: LISTENING, PARTICIPATING, AND**  
**MAKING OLD-TIME MUSIC LIVE IN CHATTANOOGA, 1995-2017**

**Oldness Revisited and New Possibilities**

*The Great Southern Fiddlers' Convention*  
*Chattanooga, Tennessee*  
*March 11, 2016*

I'm on my way to the Great Southern Fiddlers' Convention in Chattanooga. It's a key piece of Chattanooga's growing Old-time scene and draws players from around the region. I stand at the intersection of Martin Luther King Boulevard, formerly named Ninth Street, and Lindsey Street. A few blocks behind me, up a gentle hill, I can see a corner of the Memorial Auditorium, where some of the 1920s All Southern Fiddlers' Conventions were held. The Bessie Smith Cultural Center, built during Chattanooga post-industrial reinvention during the 1990s, is right across the street from me. To its right sits an old brick church building, where the fiddlers' convention is being held today. I'm here for Old-time music, but the blues is inescapable in this gentrifying neighborhood that Andrew Baxter celebrated almost a century before with his "East 9th Street Blues." Bessie Smith, the Empress of the Blues, who busked on these streets, haunts this part of town. Her portrait is painted on the side of a condemned, dilapidated old brick building that once housed the "Whole Note"—a black music club. Smiling, she looks out across a gravel parking lot towards a blues-themed fried chicken joint. The label from her 1923 Columbia hit "Down Hearted Blues" floats high up on the side of a building nearby, part of a

massive, colorful mural that I assume is meant to narrate or celebrate the progress of Chattanooga's black community.

I cross MLK towards the church turned swanky event space and read the cornerstone "FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH ORGANIZED JUNE 9TH 1867, ERECTED 1904-1905." The First Congregational Church served as an important religious and cultural site for Chattanooga's African American community—a site for preaching, worshipping, and also hearing rehearsals of Spirituals and classical music (Scott 2008: 31). Today it's filled with Old-time music. This is the kind of juxtaposition that is inescapable in a city like Chattanooga. As they do in so much of the South, histories overlap and collide here. They overlap in Old-time as well. For the more historically aware Old-time musicians, there's a lingering discomfort about the genre's history and its politics of representation. Conversations about race, power, and appropriation in this music are taking shape in some circles of the Old-time scene, but the conversations are just beginning.<sup>1</sup> In this backward-looking genre, the past—the oldness of the music—reveals both painful social injustices *and* exquisite artistry that transcends time. The politics of representation in Old-time are profoundly complex and layered.

Even as the 1920s media and record labels co-opted and represented the music's oldness as one thread in a much larger project of whiteness, Old-time musicians, over almost a century, have engaged the music's oldness in admirable and profoundly creative ways. I am here today to witness one such example. *This* fiddlers' convention is about exploring the artistry and

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<sup>1</sup> A handful of contemporary Old-time musicians have begun conversations about race and cultural appropriation. These play out through conversational threads on Facebook, like the question "Old-time musicians, can we talk about our tradition's Black cultural appropriation?" and the ensuing sixty-nine comments in which musicians attempt to make sense of their participation in the music. They also take place in more formal places like summer music camps, perhaps exemplified by a course about race and Old-time led by archivist Greg Adams and African American Grammy winner Rhiannon Giddens at the Augusta Heritage Center. They happen at African American fiddler Jake Blount's concerts, where he uses his performance to call attention to the historical presence of black musicians in the genre and to advance an anti-racist position.

participatory possibilities of this old music: it's an exploration of the potential that this old, supremely groovy music has to bring diverse people together as listening and performing participants. Its organizer hopes that the music will forge connections across the community through an experience of deeply social listening and participation.

I climb the steps into the Lindsay Street Hall. A hand printed sign declaring “Quiet Please during Performances/Contests” hangs from the entryway wall. If sound technologies—from radio to the commercial recording industry to an acoustically engineered auditorium—were critical to the popularity of the All Southern Fiddlers’ Convention during the 1920s, they are minimized at today’s event. Unlike almost every other fiddlers’ convention these days, there is, purposely, no public address system. As I enter into the space, the voices around the table outdoors and the sound of traffic give way to the sound of a fiddler testing out his double stop, calibrating notes. The audience get quiet. The fiddler begins the shuffling dun-dug-a-dun-dug-a-dun-dug-a-dun that sets the tempo for his contest piece and lets loose.

## **Introduction**

In this chapter, I tell stories about the practices of listening and learning and the forms of participation and creativity that have shaped Old-time’s circulation in Chattanooga from the 1990s into the 2010s. Since the wave of fiddlers’ conventions in the 1920s and 1930s, Old-time music has been a part of Chattanooga’s music world, existing mostly on the fringes of the city’s cultural life. After the genre coalesced in the 1920s, local players, like fiddler Bob Douglas (see Fulcher 2008 and 2009) continued to make Old-time music, approaching the genre with flexibility and creativity. Rather than telling a story of an Old-time revival, I describe an emplaced music and reveal how Chattanoogaans have sustained, understood, made, and staged Old-time music over the last three decades. I examine two key local events and two key local

actors to reveal a different approach to the music than the authenticity and purity discourse of the revival, inherited more recently by the “middle class Old-time cohort”—a “sporadic, temporary, and geographically diffuse” Old-time scene that forms at summer festivals and camps (Turino 2008: 161).

Between the 1990s and the 2010s, the expert Old-time musicians I describe have engaged with old, local music in whimsical, undogmatic, and unexpected ways. These musicians hear the artistry in old recordings, rework family traditions, and uncover new possibilities in the music’s oldness. In their ears, bodies, and hands, the meanings of oldness shift for the good: oldness becomes a quality of old local repertoires and styles, and their particular expressive energy. Engaging oldness becomes a way of setting an anchor in place and creating artistic boundaries. Tapping into old, local sounds, they engage in musical place-making, embracing (and reimagining) distinctive local sounds and resisting the homogenizing currents of life in America.

I focus on two key Old-time events and the communities that form around them, the weekly Mountain Opry and the annual Great Southern Old Time Fiddlers’ Convention. In both cases I attend to the strikingly different possibilities for participation that form around the music within the communities that sustain it. I also trace the music making of two expert musicians, longtime Mountain Opry fixture and banjo player Don Sarrell and convention organizer and professional musician Matt Downer. Housed in an old school house just north of the city on Walden’s Ridge, the Mountain Opry is a long-running, informal, weekly, pass-the-hat venue where amateur bands—mostly bluegrass—sign up for time slots and others jam in back rooms. It is favored by an older, more rural, working class audience, and provides a pathway for fledgling players to work their way up from jams to stage performances. During my regular visits from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, Old-time music was performed there alongside a range of related

music, especially bluegrass, gospel, and early and classic country. I first encountered the community as a seventh grader eager to learn Old-time banjo, and found players who claimed family traditions with delightfully diverse and generous approaches to the genre and to Old-time banjo styles. I witnessed as local musicians treated the genre as a well of creative possibilities and a site of experimentation.

The second event, the Great Southern Old Time Fiddlers' Convention, is a carefully curated, participatory experience of Old-time that invites listeners to try to hear the past. Inspired by organizer Matt Downer's interest in experimental music, unmediated encounters with music, and private listening practices, the event has been held without a sound system or amplification since its start in 2010. Downer strives to make the new convention as inclusive and participatory as possible. Downer describes it as "an active listening experience," telling a reporter, "There is no other event like this anywhere. It is all old time music presented in an unfiltered, undiluted state. No microphones, no amplification, just some of the best old time musicians from the Southeast coming together to whoop it up" (Michael 2017). Over the last seven years, the promise of the event has drawn hundreds of Chattanoogaans who come to hear dozens of fiddlers, banjo players, singers, and string bands compete for prize money and ribbons.

Contemporary musicians making Old-time music in Chattanooga do so in a dynamic city. In the 1990s Chattanooga shed its reputation as a highly polluted industrial city and recast itself as a tourist friendly, ecologically hip city of greenways, cultural attractions, and renovated riverfront—a reinvention that has continued with tech startups and a Volkswagen factory. Believing that the lived experiences of musicians offer vital insights into genre, I track banjo player, fiddler, guitarist, and songster Matt Downer's experiences as Chattanooga's sole professional Old-time musician. His path leads from experimental glitch and ambient music to

Old-time, and his story reveals the deeply felt and generative listening practices that shape learning and listening connoisseurs in the genre. Matt makes his living in a bustling Southern city.

Besides presenting a counternarrative of sustained music making to pervasive stories of revival, I look at the kinds of creative possibilities that emerge from the deep, sustained listening projects in which listening connoisseurs like Matt Downer engage. Offering a series of ethnographic vignettes from his Great Southern Fiddlers' Convention, I ask how private listening practices shape public performances/projects. Ethnomusicologist David Novak conceives of these sorts of relationships as feedback loops between the "liveness" of events/performances and the "deadness" of private listening experiences (2013). Following Novak, I interrogate the "co-constitutive relationships between performance and media in the lives of listeners" (Novak 2013:30), as Matt Downer's intimate, private listening practice shapes and structures a deeply social listening experience of liveness. Inspired in part by his own deep listening, Matt invites convention attendees to construct an aural imaginary that is about feeling connected through collective listening, being transported in time, and encountering creative energy more directly.

### **Matt Downer's Unexpected Routes: Noise, Ambient, and Field Recording Sand Mountain**

I met Matt Downer, who's now in his mid 40s, around 2003. My musician friend Bob Townsend had told me that Matt's guitar playing sounded "old" (in the best of ways), meaning that there were thunky but crisp bass notes and a dry, unsustained backbeat strum. For a couple years in the mid 2000s, the three of us played in a band together, gigging around Chattanooga as the River City Roustabouts, playing mostly local repertoire. Matt and I busked regularly and played parties and weddings as a duo. On our way to gigs or during breaks, we talked a lot about local music, old recordings, noise and ambient music, and Old-time techniques. A complex,



unexpected portrait emerged as Matt brought the worlds of experimental music, sound studies, and Old-time together in a heady way. He made good music and treated Old-time music as thinking music.

Matt's story is a story about Old-time music in Chattanooga. As far as I know, he is the only person making a living in the city with Old-time music. Of course, he supplements with other gigs as needed. There are a couple of professional bluegrass players around and plenty of devoted Old-time enthusiasts, some of whom play gigs around town. Old-time music currently exists on the periphery of the city's arts life. Its practitioners occasionally find stage slots in the city's large Riverbend Festival, but are more likely to be found busking on the streets or drumming up a gig at a club, bar, or restaurant. Old-time acts are even absent from the rosters of the city's two largest local bluegrass festivals. Nevertheless, Matt finds relatively steady work.

At times, his hustle has led him to seek arts grants; at others, it has led him to dependable gigs in the tourism industry, built since the 1990s around a revitalized riverfront and an arts and outdoor recreational identity. Working for a decade or so at the Tennessee Aquarium along the riverfront, he found a way to incorporate daily performances of Old-time music into his job. Eventually, he started playing gigs at the Incline Railway on the southern side of the city in the St. Elmo neighborhood.<sup>2</sup> Here tourists ride an old school tram up the side of Lookout Mountain to a Civil War site (and one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Chattanooga) at the top. For several summers, the Incline and Rock City Gardens, both charming, old school tourist sites, hired Matt and his band the New Binkley Brothers, which later morphed into the Old Time Travelers, to perform. Gigs at Rock City provide steady work, especially during the summer months.

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<sup>2</sup> Coincidentally, this is the neighborhood that fiddlers Andrew Baxter and Jess Young all called home almost a century ago.

Here's a piece of how he got to this point:

In the 1990s, before he had dug into Old-time, Matt was involved in a small experimental music scene in Chattanooga. He describes his exploration of noise and ambient sound as “super-lo-fi,” a blatant rejection of digital sound technologies. He was fascinated with the sounds of everyday life in Chattanooga and carried a cheap mono dictaphone around with him. He'd record the sounds of a city that was undergoing a shift from a post-industrial, environmental wreck to a city celebrated around the nation for its comeback and momentum. He made tape compositions that experimented with everyday objects and sounds: he pushed cordless phones to the edge of feedback, tweaked shortwave radios, and micked and amplified the sound of a Mister Potato Head dawdling down the fingerboard of a guitar. It was playful and experimental. More often than not, these noise shows were tucked away in obscure venues that drew a small but dedicated noise punk scene.

Part of working in the realm of the super lo-fi was the aestheticization and embrace of technological glitches, blips, and misfires. Matt tells me he was trying to make music that an old, glitchy Nintendo game system would want to listen to (if a Nintendo were able to listen). From Chattanooga, he was following the experimental electronic music scene, glitch music, that was emerging in 1990s Berlin. Glitch is an experimental “post-digital” outgrowth of electronic dance music that adhered to an “aesthetics of failure” and drew inspiration from the likes of Karlheinz Stockhausen, Morton Subotnick, and John Cage (Casconne 2002: 15). He listened to artist Martin Popp's “Oval” project, in which Popp would paint on the bottom of CDs and compose pieces from the sounds of skips. It is not hard to trace a link between experimental artists interested in exploring and exploiting the limits of new technologies and Old-time artists

interested in thinking about mediation and exploring glitchy old technologies (Old-time listening connoisseurs learn to love the weird sonic artifacts that fill the old recordings.)

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, Matt started taking the same dictaphone that he had used to make his tape compositions to make field recordings of his grandfather Wayne Heard and his neighbors on Sand Mountain, Alabama. Heard was a dobro player and was connected to the older musicians up there. Matt had spent the first dozen years of his life Sand Mountain—the low-lying finger of the Cumberland Plateau that reaches down into rural northeastern Alabama.<sup>3</sup> Starting in 1998, he began learning the art of backing up Old-time fiddlers on guitar—a skill that requires the cultivation of perfect yet adaptable sense of musical timing and a refined taste in local chord preferences. He taped his grandfather’s guitar-playing friend Stanley Baker’s bass runs and worked at replicating them. These field recordings offered him a course of study in local backup techniques: chord choice, rhythm, and bass runs.

As his guitar skills grew, he struck up a friendship with an older Sand Mountain fiddler named Jess Moore (1911-2006). By the early 2000s, these sorts of relationships between older fiddlers—especially senior fiddlers who maintained and performed a repertoire that included local and familial tunes—and younger players had become exceedingly rare. Through Jess and the other elder musicians, Matt tapped into a deeper history of Old-time music making and repertoire on Sand Mountain. Learning to back up Jess pushed Matt deeper into the music, refined his skills as an accompanist, and gave him credibility in a community that esteems face-to-face learning with elders. Critically, Matt tells me that Jess Moore’s attitude towards music

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<sup>3</sup> Sand Mountain was made nationally visible in Dennis Covington’s (1995) National Book Award Finalist manuscript about snake handling religious practices that have been part of the cultural scene there and in other parts of the American South. However, such stories about exoticized religious practice can easily eclipse the cultural landscape of the place. In the world of music, a number of significant musicians and musical practices have found their home on Sand Mountain. Notably, the country music close harmony brother duet Charlie and Ira Louvin cut their musical teeth on Sand Mountain. To this day, Sand Mountain hosts a vibrant Sacred Harp singing community.

making has shaped his own thinking about music. He explains that in Jess' mind, "It [music] was much less of a commodity or a product or something like that. It was just something people did" (Downer 2017). This belief that music should be an everyday, human activity—*just something people did*—shapes Matt's music making and projects. Even in his professional life where the music is a piece of his livelihood, he values the music's participatory qualities and possibilities, creating experiences that allow listeners to encounter it afresh.

### **Part I: The Mountain Opry, Walden's Ridge 1995-2001**

#### **The Space**

It's worth leaving Matt Downer's story for a moment and considering one site where Chattanooga consumers consumed Old-time music in the late 90s and early 2000s. The Mountain Opry is about a 20 minute drive north of Chattanooga, across the Tennessee river, and up the aptly named W road that constricts down to one lane as it winds through sandstone bluffs to crest at Walden's Ridge. From the top of the mountain, it's about a mile and half drive along the brow past fancy, old houses that overlook the shimmering lights of the city at night. In the late-1800s, this area was known as Summertown, named for the summer getaways that wealthy Chattanooga families (including my grandmother's) built among the mountain families who had been there much longer. Now it mostly feels like a nice suburb with lots of trees, some funky old summer houses, and few modest houses.

The Mountain Opry occupies a weathered, grey, rectangular 1930s frame school house. It can probably seat 250 people. A painted wooden cutout of a man playing a fiddle is nailed to the front of the building. There's an old sports field behinds where folks park and jam in good weather. To the left, beyond the gravel parking lot and the rusty playground equipment, is a little pavilion with some picnic tables—another good spot for jamming. Inside, rows of auditorium

style seats—the kind with the wooden backs, fabric seats, and blown-out springs—lead down to the stage. To the left of the stage is the concession area that smells like popcorn and coffee. Behind the stage and to the left are the little practice and jamming rooms, where musicians warm up or just play for fun. In the back is a large room where there’s often a big, welcoming jam. The Mountain Opry was a key site where Old-time music could be heard in 1990s Chattanooga. It was there as a high schooler that I weaseled into a packed audience to hear Bob Douglas fiddle at celebrations for his 100th and 101st birthdays. Douglas had unimpeachable status as an Old-time musician: he had won the 1928 All Southern Fiddlers’ Convention and recorded two cuts for Victor in October 1928. Since local musicians opened the Opry in 1979, Douglas had found a welcoming and appreciative audience there. In fact, it was so dear to him that he named a composition after it— “The Mountain Opry Break Down.” The Opry’s scene regularly included Old-time performers alongside Bob Douglas.

*Figure 5 (below): The front of the Mountain Opry, Walden, Tennessee, December 2017. (photo by author)*



*Figure 6 (below): Backstage at the Mountain Opry, young musicians wait to join expert banjo player Ed Brown for a few tunes, Mountain Opry, Walden, Tennessee. December 2017. (photo by the author)*



*Figure 7 (below): Looking to the stage from the entrance of the Mountain Opry, Walden, Tennessee, December 2017. (photo by author)*



## **Genre Leakiness**

The Opry created a social space where listeners and musicians could gather on Friday nights to catch up; sip coffee out of Styrofoam cups; jam in the back rooms, pavilion, or field out back; or play a set on stage. It was an outpost of rural white working class expressive culture floating on the suburban edge of Chattanooga. It sits at the point where an affluent suburban

scene sputters out into a form of rurality marked by more modest homes surrounded by a few acres. Musically, spatially, and socially, the Opry sits on the edges of things. This free, pass-the-hat venue is and was a throwback: in the late 1990s, it was a place that pitched a big tent for capital C country music. Although it generally leaned towards bluegrass, it created spaces for boogies, classic country, Jimmie Rodgers imitations, family gospel groups, and, during the 1990s, an Old-time opening act. Genres blended comfortably. Amateur performers seemed more interested in entertaining their audience than in maintaining some sort of generic purity. And audience members were more interested in hearing good music than hearing a particular kind of music. Dancers were happy to two-step, flat-foot, or waltz to whatever genre of music a band delivered, so long as the band could keep time.

The scene at the Mountain Opry reveals generous attitudes about Old-time music in Chattanooga now and since its founding in 1979. It also suggests the ways that public performances of Old-time music in Chattanooga were largely untouched by the more stringent understandings of the genre held by some revival participants. In fact, creativity, innovation, and generosity have been the rule at the Opry, even among musicians who were trying to replicate the sounds that their musical relatives made. Because I first encountered the Opry as a would-be banjo player, I make these points through a discussion of banjo styles—the thing that I was most attentive to during the five or six years when I was a regular attendee from around 1995 to 2001.

### **Hanging at the Mountain Opry**

I launched into this peculiar scene as a fledgling banjo-playing seventh grader with two objectives. First and foremost, I was seeking a place to meet up with my new crush and, knowing that my parents wouldn't be into any formal dates, the Mountain Opry provided a cover for our not so clandestine meetings. Second, I had purchased a cheap 1980s Korean banjo from a

friend's father, a lawyer, for one hundred dollars with the promise that when I decided I didn't actually want to play the banjo, he would buy it back. I bought a bluegrass instructional book penned by a bluegrass banjo ace, but the book proved useless to me. I put the picks on backwards and failed to learn even the most basic roll. With the picks working against me, my fingers got caught on the strings rather than gracefully sliding over them. I needed an actual human to guide me. Through a circuitous path that involved the Disney Epcot Center, an Old-time banjo player from Winnipeg, and a set of VHS instructional videos of banjo player Bob Carlin, I began to learn to play the type of Old-time banjo known as clawhammer style. However, I knew no one in Chattanooga who played this style, and as helpful as the videos were, they offered no feedback on my technique. The Mountain Opry might be a place where I would find someone who could give me some pointers, or at least let me know whether or not I was getting it at all. Over the next six years, the Opry became a musical home. It was a participatory place where I would be cultivated as a musician and, eventually, invited to perform on stage for the first time. It was place where I could watch and listen. It was a place where I could learn to make music with others.

Most Friday nights, I'd sit in one of the seven or eight rows of wooden folding chairs set up behind the stage instead of the worn auditorium-style seats running at a slight slope down to stage. The venue could seat around 200 people in the front and another fifty or so back where I sat. Most nights there was probably half that in attendance. I'd munch slightly stale popcorn from the concession stand off to the left of the stage front that was run by some sort of civic club. Across from the concession stand were a water fountain and bathrooms with sagging floors. To the left, a door led outside to a stoop where attendees could have a smoke or catch up on life and music. Lining the wall across from the concession was a fascinating cabinet of local curios that



consisted of albums, instruments, yellowed newspaper clippings, signed promo photos of second-tier bluegrass and gospel bands, and other mementos that displayed the achievements of regulars—performers and attendees.

The regulars were older, many in their 70s and 80s. Besides the steady flow of curious Chattanoogaans or high school and college kids who recognized the unintentional hipness of the venue, most attendees were from more rural, working class communities just beyond Chattanooga. Some would drive as much as an hour to participate in the weekly ritual. Over the course of the evening, three or four older women would leave their seats on the side of stage and flatfoot behind the band when a group played a breakdown. When a singer delved into the classic country catalog, a couple, perhaps wearing white Reebok sneakers and matching teal wind suits with blocky magenta accents, would two-step or waltz, only to be joined by a few other couples. Between the start at 8:00 PM and the end at 11:00 PM, bands rehearsed and others jammed in the three high-ceilinged back rooms that were located to the left of the stage. A handful of volunteers showed up early to set up the mic stands and monitors and took shifts working the mixing board (with a range of outcomes, good and bad) from the back left side of the auditorium. Ken Holloway, who both played regularly and helped run the venue, made recordings of the evening's performance from the mixing board. He'd broadcast the recordings from an AM station off the backside of the mountain near Dunlap, Tennessee. He'd also dub copies of performances for bands that asked: he dubbed me a copy of my first performance on stage, one that involved my playing "Soldier's Joy" on the banjo (preceded by my rookie deliberation with the fiddler over whether I played it in the key of C or D).

## Old-time Banjo

In this vibrant and friendly world, it was the banjos that caught my attention. As I listened to banjo players take the stage at the Opry, I witnessed a diverse banjo ecosystem. I heard a range of banjo styles, based in both bluegrass and Old-time and occasionally crossing both genres. However, clawhammer, as distilled in my instructional VHS of revivalist professional Old-time banjo player Bob Carlin, was nowhere to be found. It was perplexing; after all, from what I understood, clawhammer *was* Old-time banjo. There were the three-finger bluegrassers—straight ahead imitators of Earl Scruggs and Don Reno—who had spent years poring over their recorded output, internalizing their licks and tweaking banjos to get the right snap and punch. There was regular Ed Brown, a melodic three finger banjo innovator who rendered intricate, rippling melodies through left hand fingerboard work that was unheard of before the style came into vogue in the 1970s. (Ed, however, had grown up playing Old-time with his guitar-playing father Ray “Georgia Boy” Brown and his longtime playing partner Bob Douglas.) There were those who applied syncopated bluegrass rolls to country songs or Beatles’ songs. There were the unpolished and at times disjointedly stuttering proto-bluegrass three finger stylings of Atlas Mealer, whose repertoire included bluegrass and gospel standards and a handful of Old-time family pieces he learned from his uncle “Tom Cat” Payne, a fixture and banjo champion at the 1920s All Southern Old Time Fiddlers’ Convention. A king of East Tennessee Old-time banjo stylings, “Tom Cat” Payne, according to Atlas and local legend, played his way out of prison by winning a bet and playing the banjo with his toes.

In the more recognizably Old-time category, there was the highly individualistic style of banjo player Curtis Hicks and his Old-Time Strings.<sup>4</sup> Clad in blue button-down shirts, red suspenders, black hats and pants, they mined the novelty and comedic side of the repertoire, getting laughs out of audiences. They'd also play standard Old-time fare inspired by Curtis's love of old recordings of Gid Tanner and the Georgia Skillet Lickers, Uncle Dave Macon, and others. "My grandfather he was an old thumb and finger picker. I learned some from him," Curtis told me about his grandfather, Charlie Hicks (1885-1960), who lived in the Kelly's Ferry community on the banks of the Tennessee River, close to where old fiddler Jess Young was picking up tunes from black musicians in the 1910s (Hicks 2004).<sup>5</sup> As a boy, Curtis learned to play a few tunes in his grandfather's style and soaked up the banjo styles of relatives Ira and Dan Hicks, who like his grandfather played in several different up and down picking styles. Curtis set the banjo aside for many years, picking it back up in earnest in his forties. By the time I was hanging out with him, Curtis's idiosyncratic lick involved striking down for a melodic note with his index finger and brushing upward for a backbeat with the ring finger (Brown 2006).<sup>6</sup> In my time making this music, I have yet to see anyone else play this style.

Although I appreciated Curtis's music, Don Sarrell's two-finger banjo playing stood out. It was driving, versatile, and executed masterfully. A slender man in his sixties who knew how to

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<sup>4</sup> A further testament to generic fluidity, Curtis Hicks's band included Peanut Faircloth on washboard and various honking apparatuses. Faircloth was an emcee at local bluegrass festivals, the writer of Hank Snow's seasonal favorite "Reindeer Boogie," and a retired DJ. The group regularly sang their mix of novelty songs and gospel at the Mountain Opry.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, Curtis's grandfather, who played in both a two-finger up-picking style and a down stroke double thumb style, had accompanied Jess Young at dances near the Aetna Mountain coal mines during the 1910s. In an interview Curtis told me: "They'd have a big dance about every Saturday night out there. And, Jess, he'd play for the dance, and my granddaddy would pick the banjo. He never was on none of the records, but he played out when they was having a dance or something. He'd play banjo with him" (Hicks 2004).

<sup>6</sup> In a further testament to his fluid approach to Old-time banjo playing, Curtis told me that troubles with tendonitis had led him to experiment with using his middle finger in place of the ring finger.

rock a bolo tie, Don made the hour-long drive from his house in New Salem on the back of Lookout Mountain to Walden's Ridge each week to front the house band, "Down Yonder." They filled the opening slot at 8:00 PM with classic fiddle tunes, waltzes, songs, and gospel numbers. His propulsive brushes on the back beat reminded me of the clawhammer brush I was learning from my VHS, but there was something special about what he was doing. While riffs and breaks dominated the bluegrass banjoists' playing, a satisfying blend of rhythm and melody marked Don's playing. Here, I thought, was someone who could tell me if my technique was right.

After he played his opening set, Don would often head into a vacant practice room or, in warmer weather, out to the pavilion or field outside, where a picnic bench or the bumper of his Ford Aerostar minivan provided the necessary seating. His fiddler from Down Yonder, Tom Adkins, would usually join him. Tom, who was in his 70s at this point, and his brother had played string band music when they were growing up in the coal mining community of Soddy, just north of Chattanooga. Tom was plump, had fluffy white hair that he kept neatly parted, and often wore Oxford shirts. Although he could play breakdowns and told me about how he used to play in "wildcat" tuning (AEAE), he played mostly standard fiddle tunes and particularly enjoyed schmaltzy waltzes during my time with him. He was a bit formal, and his music reflected it. I'd follow them, peeking in different practice rooms, until they found a vacant room to set up and play. Tom and Don would play waltz after waltz, and I'd wait, stifling yawns, in hopes that Don would play a breakdown or one of his banjo compositions. Waltzes and gospel numbers don't do much for testosterone-driven male adolescents. Eventually, Don would speed things up and deliver the breakdown I was jonesing for. If it were a tune I knew, I'd plunk along with my banjo, watching and attempting to replicate where Don found the notes with his left hand. They were gracious about letting others play with them; occasionally, they'd let me call

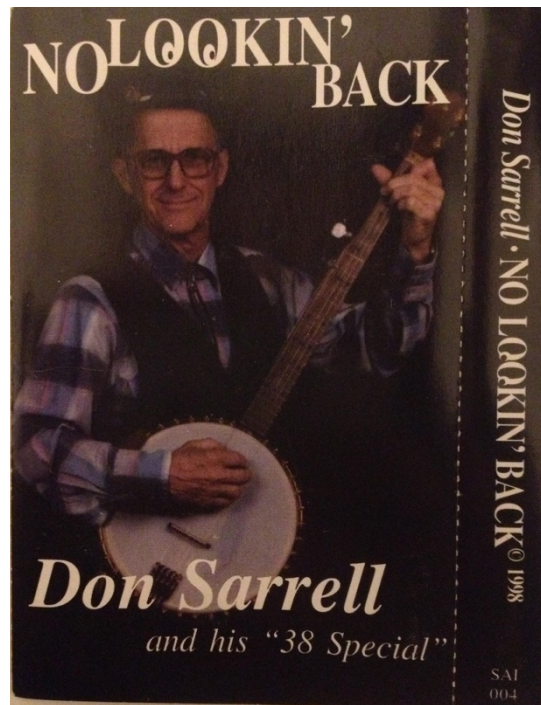
one. However, much of the time, they were teaching me to sit back and observe, to listen and learn. If it were one of Don's compositions, I'd set my banjo down and lean in, enveloped in his sounds.

As I learned his repertoire from repeated Friday night hangs, I'd ask for particular pieces. He had a handful of bluesy, playful pieces he had composed in open C tuning (gCGCE). The tuning creates a wonderful low droning note that undergirds explorations up the neck, or, in Don's case, invitations to improvise and punctuate rhythms with a blast of left hand pull-offs. He had no issue with playing an original piece alongside old standards. Old-time was a fluid thing for him. He named each of these original pieces for local sites, rooting the new composition back into the landscape of his home in New Salem on the back of Lookout Mountain—

“New Salem Special,” for instance, for his home community, or “Cloudland Cascade” and “Riding Hurricane Creek” for two waterways that tumble off the plateau through sandstone gorges.

For Don, Old-time banjo music created a space in which he tried to replicate the style of his father while also creating new compositions and building new instruments. It was music about the past and music for creative exploration. An electrical engineer by trade, Don had carefully designed and built his open back banjo, the “.38 Special,” to compete volume-wise with powerful resonator banjos. He embedded a .38 caliber bullet casing in the peg head and

Figure 8 (below): Banjo player Don Sarrell's "No Lookin' Back" (1998) album j-card (from author's collection)



designed and machined a tone ring that would produce shimmering bright sounds. Musicians who knew him still joke about the inordinate, almost earsplitting, amount of sound he could pull from the instrument. By the late 1990s, the timbral aesthetics among most Old-time banjo tended towards plunky, tubby open-back sounds. Since the 1970s, a particular version of clawhammer had become the most common approach to Old-time banjo, and a related sound had become desirable. In the ensuing decades, a number of small-scale banjo makers, notably Dave Forbes, Bart Reiter, Mike Ramsey, and Kevin Enoch, began building and selling banjos with thin rims and simple brass hoop tone rings, designed to achieve a kind of plunkiness associated with earlier builder Kyle Creed, who was a key figure of the revival era.<sup>7</sup> In this moment when subdued appearances and plunkiness were dominant, Don's .38 Special challenged these popular banjos both visually, with its gold plating and eye-catching bullet casing, and sonically, with its elaborate, hefty, specially designed and machined tone ring made to accentuate the treble and blast out bright sounds.

Don's compositions were unrelenting, ricocheting from bead board wall to plaster ceiling to oak floor and filling the practice rooms with thick sound. To produce the sound, he drew his right index finger inwards, up-picking a string as he made a "come here" gesture. Then he would flick the finger back down across the lower four strings, juxtaposing a pinpoint melody note against a full, throaty chord or drone. With his other fingers braced on the banjo head, he'd follow these two motions with his thumb striking the higher pitched drone of the fifth string. At its most basic, his lick followed the contours of clawhammer; however, it had the blended smoothness of milk chocolate compared to the more bracing 70% dark chocolate quality of clawhammer. Working primarily with a back and forth motion of the index finger made his style

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<sup>7</sup> See Jones-Bamman (2017) for a discussion of contemporary Old-time banjo building.

ripple. Unlike clawhammer's more rigid set of downward motions, Don's index finger was free to move both ways and to slip two-finger picked passages in between brushes. Within this inventive, freewheeling style, pull-offs stacked one atop another and created cascades of syncopation. Accentuated brushes could be layered on top of each other, something not easily accomplished with the clawhammer style. It was a creative style that allowed Don to experiment with rhythm and to forcefully accent phrases.

After these performances, I'd ask him to teach me how to play like him, how to do his right-hand lick. "I don't play right," he'd tell me, relegating his own style as something less than the official clawhammer lick and its related techniques, pointing out that he could never figure out how to drop his thumb.<sup>8</sup> "Keep doing what you're doing. You're doing it right," he would tell me, acknowledging his own understanding of a particular version of clawhammer's dominance in the music. He dismissed his own playing as an effort to recover his father's style. His father had lived north of Chattanooga, in Rhea County, and had played a style of banjo that I would later learn was as common, if not more common, than standard issue, revival-codified clawhammer in this part of Tennessee. Even though he had won a national Old-time Banjo Championship and placed and won in the senior banjo contests at the prestigious Appalachian String Band Festival in Clifftop, West Virginia, Don's attitude towards his style made me think that he somehow felt that it was inferior to the more mainstream clawhammer style that he probably encountered during his trips to the Clifftop festival and other Old-time events. Whatever the case, he encouraged me to stick with my generic, VHS-inspired lick, suggesting that I was somehow playing Old-time banjo "more correctly."

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<sup>8</sup> "Dropping the thumb" is a fairly widespread clawhammer technique that involves dropping the thumb from the fifth string to one of the other interior strings. The technique requires more sophistication and coordination than the basic clawhammer lick.

## Revival-style Banjo

Only in retrospect do I realize that I stumbled in to an unusually diverse, local Old-time banjo ecosystem in the 1990s and early 2000s. Somehow, through the revival or whatever we choose to call the process—a hegemony of taste and style that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s—clawhammer had come to dominate Old-time banjo playing.<sup>9</sup> Within the historically diverse world of banjo styles in the American South, a particular technique of playing had come to be the dominant (and most audible) species of Old-time banjo, mutating into a range of sounds and rhythms—from the percussive cluck and reggae accented backbeats of players in Ithaca to the brilliant, driving blend of rhythm and melody of contemporary players like David Winston. Now, top-shelf, touring professionals like Canadian Allison Degroot can study clawhammer banjo style at the Berklee College of Music. My instructional videos were introducing me to this style of playing, rooted in part in the revival’s celebration of compelling music and banjo styles historically encountered around Mt. Airy and in Southwest Virginia.

For the most part—and in spite of the breadth of Old-time banjo styles documented over the prior century—clawhammer had become the preferred banjo approach among a generation of players during the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> It came to be taught at camps like the Swannanoa Gathering and the Augusta Heritage Center. It was transmitted through instructional cassette tapes and VHS videos produced by Homespun Tapes. It was the most audible banjo style heard on popular LPs,

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<sup>9</sup> Both Ray Allen (2010) and John Bealle (2005) describe ensemble styles of music-making that became codified during the Old-time revival, especially through popular recordings by bands like the Fuzzy Mountain String Band and the Highwoods String Band. Although there were exceptions, clawhammer banjo became the preferred technique for music making in this mode. Of course there were exceptions and players in that world playing in different styles.

<sup>10</sup> I recognize that this claim is a bit over-simplistic, and that a number of players were involved in exploring the range of sounds and techniques in Old-time banjo. Gail Gillespie, Alice Gerrard, Mike Seeger, Dan Gellert, Andy Cahan, Pat Conte, Brett Riggs, Mac Benford, Paul Ritscher, Rick Good, Paul Brown, Rafe Stefanini, Kirk Sutphin, Bill Diloff, Bill Schmidt, and Brad Leftwich (the list goes on) all are expert Old-time fingerpickers who were playing in that moment. The list goes on.



cassettes, and early CDs by popular bands like the Plank Road String Band, the Hellbenders, the Wandering Ramblers, the Horseflies, the Heartbeats, and the Wildcats. As folks ran all sorts of pieces through the stylistic string band mill and forged a new style of ensemble playing, this style of banjo playing glued bands together. It became the go-to banjo stylistic tool, with players developing a fascinating range of approaches and timbres. Although there is increasing interest in banjo up-picking styles as of the mid-2010s, Old-time banjo players who study in the Berklee College of Music Roots Program primarily develop skills as clawhammer players. This style, played on an open back banjo, still is thought of by many as the quintessential Old-time approach to banjo, and, at many contests, the use of metal finger picks (something associated with bluegrass style banjo) can disqualify a player (even though finger picks and up-picking styles were commonplace during the 1920s and 30s).

Somehow these trends had not quite reached the scene at the Mountain Opry and in Chattanooga more broadly, allowing a creative and diverse range of banjo styles to persist and develop into the 21st century. To be sure, Don had a sense of the more typical ways that people approached Old-time banjo playing, but he chose a different path that blended his father's approach with his own creativity. Although players like Curtis Hicks and Don Sarrell were listening to older recordings of players like Uncle Dave Macon, they were also deeply invested in creating styles that aligned with their memory of how family members had played the banjo. Their projects of emulation were rooted in familial memories and efforts to sound like local predecessors rather than like heroes of the revival or other revivalists. Even as they were rooted in local sounds, they were also open to experimentation. Their music making was less an effort to maintain some pure and authentic genre than it was to find personal pleasure in the music and to entertain friends. In the 1990s, the Mountain Opry was its own music world where a

participatory, intergenerational community formed. This community cut across boundaries of class and genre and created spaces where a fledgling banjo player could listen, learn, and grow.

*Figure 10 (below): Don Sarrell (banjo), Joseph Decosimo (fiddle), Tom Adkins (guitar), at the Mountain Opry, Walden, Tennessee. late 1990s. (author's collection)*



*Figure 9 (below): Don Sarrell (banjo), Joseph Decosimo (fiddle), Tom Adkins (guitar), at the Mountain Opry, Walden, Tennessee. late 1990s. (author's collection)*



## **Part II: Local Sounds, Energies, and Affects**

As Curtis Hicks and Don Sarrell were experimenting with banjo styles and performing at the Mountain Opry, Matt Downer discovered a few like-minded musicians in Chattanooga and began exploring Old-time music in earnest. With nascent chops as an Old-time guitar player and

a growing interest in learning fiddle and banjo, he forged a strong musical kinship with Ron Williams and Ken Parr in the early 2000s. Like Matt, both Ron and Ken, who were in their 50s or 60s, were interested in mining local field recordings and crafting a sound based on that material. They developed their own micro-world of pleasure-filled listening defined by their predilection for savory, local field recordings. They formed a band called “Citico,” naming it after a tune Ron had collected from a number of older local players. Matt found a kindred spirit in Ron, who was a generation older and had done extensive field recording around Chattanooga in the 1970s and 80s.<sup>11</sup> Neither he nor Matt were afraid of jumping into lo-fi, DIY music projects. They were connoisseurs of local field recordings, savoring the twists and turns of the music—Blaine Smith’s swooping fiddle notes and Eldie Barbee’s raucous bowing.

Drawing heavily on Ron’s field recordings and linked to an older generation of local players through Ron’s stories and memories, Citico’s performances brought these local sounds back into circulation at their shows. The creativity of traditional musicians around Chattanooga, as documented by Ron’s Pine Breeze project, was immense and revealed delightful stylistic diversity. As the scene at the Mountain Opry suggested, the area was home to even more approaches to banjo playing—including idiosyncratic up-picking and down-picking styles. There were eclectic repertoires and styles, like Blaine Smith’s, that hinted at musical exchanges with black musicians. There were the Chastain and Barbee’s string band performances that recalled

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<sup>11</sup> In 1975, Ron had schemed up a local music field recording project that rode the wave of grant funding for public folklore work. He created a Foxfire-style project in which the emotionally disturbed students with whom he worked at the Pine Breeze center would oversee the field recording, production, editing and layout of eight albums of local, traditional music. Ron reflects, “I had naively assumed that we would easily find local musicians, who had been waiting anxiously over the years for a group of emotionally disturbed adolescents and their longhaired teacher to pull up in a State van in their front yard to record their performances of fiddle tunes and ballads passed down through the centuries. Amazingly, it turned out that this was what happened” (Williams 2005: 2-3). “It’s obvious that we were not a professional record label. We were not Folkways or Rounder—anything like that. We were a residential psychiatric institute for adolescents. For a record label out of the state Department of Mental Health, we did a pretty good job,” Ron told me during an interview over a decade ago (Williams 2007).

the wild, intense rhythms of Southeast Tennessee and North Georgia bands from the 1920s. Ron's field recordings became core repertoire and fodder for Citico's performances. The band internalized these field recordings and crafted and reimagined a distinctly local sound. Ken Parr fiddled shuffling short-bow rhythms like Eldia Barbee. Ron played a down stroke banjo style as he remembered Florrie Stewart, Calvin Chastain, and Oscar Barbee playing. Matt dropped guitar bass runs he had learned from his grandfather's friend Stanley Baker. Along the way, Matt developed his own galloping banjo style based on local sounds. They played gigs around Chattanooga at coffee shops, hip bars, and street festivals, where listeners appreciated the inherent funkiness of rural local music in an era when locally sourced products, cultural and otherwise, were becoming morally and aesthetically preferable.

In 2006, Matt started a new project called the "New Binkley Brothers" that continued to explore the power of performing old local and regional styles and repertoires.<sup>12</sup> Over the next eight years, the band would busk, entertain tourists at Rock City, rage at clubs, play auditoriums, and provide music for weddings and parties. Band-mates Daniel Binkley and Clark Williams met Matt while they were undergraduates at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Neither Daniel nor Clark had been around much Old-time music. Matt became their tutor, schooling them on 1920s Old-time sounds, especially the old 78s from Tennessee and North Georgia bands. Not unlike Citico, the New Binkley Brother developed their own listening practice and tastes. This listening fed back into their performances. Daniel began learning clawhammer banjo. Clark, who had been a far-out singer-songwriter type, learned to fiddle and play Old-time guitar.

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<sup>12</sup> Their name, "New Binkley Brothers," was a direct invocation of an early band that had broadcast regularly on the Grand Ole Opry, "The Binkley Brother's Dixie Clodhoppers." They came by the name honestly: band-member Daniel Binkley's great-grandfather, Amos Binkley, and his great-uncle, Gale Binkley, were in the original band and had made frequent appearances on WSM's Grand Ole Opry between 1926 and 1938. They were recorded by famous A&R man Ralph Peer in a Victor session in 1928. This bit of family history, like Matt's claim to a family tradition, added a layer of authenticity to their performances for listeners who cared such things.

The trio developed a tough, dense, blue ribbon-winning sound. They also did something most Old-time bands can only dream of: they attracted audiences. Their music was infectious. It caught the attention of hipsters, indie kids, punk rockers, bluegrass fans, old time fans, tourists, festival organizers, and arts organizations.

New Binkley Brothers' sets electrified audiences with their new, old music, rooted in their listening practice. During a sweaty, cramped show at the dive bar J.J.'s Bohemia, Clark's rendering of fiddler (and worm farmer) Hoyt Ming's "Indian War Whoop" worked PBR-swilling twenty-somethings into a frenzy. His wildcat vocals punctuated the insistent, droning tune, as he unleashed a sustained high *whooooo*. He would trance out in the midst of ballads, swinging his arms and torso around like Joy Division's Ian Curtis. Their audiences found music that they could rage to when Matt let loose on a fiddle tune; they also found moments that could tug on their heartstrings, like when Clark would sing an old ballad. They crafted sets from ballads, fiddle tunes, and harmonized, old novelty songs, like the Georgia Yellowhammers' 1927 absurdist side "Fourth of July at a County Fair" which, among other things, describes a lunar hot air balloon trip gone awry.

In both Citico and the New Binkley Brothers, Matt Downer convincingly and compellingly brought the fiddle tunes, banjo licks, and guitar runs he learned from old recordings back to life. Unlike the abundance of Old-time bands that can only get Old-time fans to show up to gigs, Matt's bands and playing connected with audiences, bringing them sounds they had likely never heard. Getting audiences excited about Old-time requires true skill as a performer, and in these projects, Matt refined the skill, creatively transforming obscure, old, local recordings and repertoire into moving, grooving, immersive experiences. Careful, pleasure-filled

listening drove and shaped his art. In his bands, small intense communities of connoisseurship formed along the way as they savored and embodied the energy of old recordings.

### **Part III: The Great Southern Fiddlers' Convention**



*Figure 11 (above): Matt Downer at the Great Southern Fiddler's Convention, Chattanooga, Tennessee, 12 March, 2017. (photograph by author)*

### **The Social Possibilities of Oldness: Social Listening and Participation at the Great Southern Fiddlers' Convention**

*Late evening at the Great Southern  
Lindsay Street Hall, Chattanooga  
March 12, 2017*

I stand on the edge of the stage, raised six inches above the hall's floor. It's unusually cold this year and flurrying outside. I look down the aisle that splits the two hundred or so audience members in half. The streetlights that line MLK and Lindsey Street send dim, dappled green light through the large, restored stained glass windows set in the wall across from me. It mixes with the soft white light from the chandeliers that hang from the pressed tin panels in the ceiling, creating a warm, crepuscular scene. Besides a cough or creaking folding chair, the audience is quiet. They're waiting for me to play my first piece for the contest.

I take a deep breath and raise my fiddle up, resting it where my collarbone and neck meet. I bring my bow up and draw it down to test out my tuning and the tightness of my bow hairs, applying a bit more pressure in the downward stroke than it takes to tear a piece of notebook paper. As I draw the bow, I push the ring finger of my right hand down onto the high E string with the same pressure you would use if you wanted to make a grain of rice stick to your finger tip, droning an A note against the open A string below it. Without a microphone, it's just me, my instrument, and this space filled with ears that are eager to hear something different, to experience old music. I can feel their listening. This sound—a test of my intonation and the room—jumps from the instrument. The plaster half-dome ceiling above the stage pushes it out into the hall, where angled tin ceiling tiles direct it outward and downward towards the audience, the heart pine floors, and the stained glass and brick walls. Designed in 1905 to make preaching and voices audible for the African American congregation that worshipped here, this is what the space was made to do. The sound returns back to me, surprisingly loud, slightly brighter than when it left. The space is what sound engineers call “live”—a reference to the crisp reverberance of the room. In “live” spaces like this one made of wood, plaster, and brick, the fleshy smacks of applause are accentuated and bounce around the room.

Even as the event draws inspiration from the artistry of Chattanooga's earlier conventions, the acoustics of the spaces are radically different: the wet reverberance of this 1905 church and the “clear, direct, nonreverberant” modern sound of the acoustically designed 1924 Memorial Auditorium, where the earlier conventions were held, give rise to drastically different sonic experiences (Thompson 2002:3).<sup>13</sup> A few months later, Matt Downer would tell me how

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<sup>13</sup> Historian Emily Thompson examines the development of electroacoustic and architectural technologies that fostered “a clear, direct, nonreverberant” modern sound in the 1920s (2002:3). The Memorial Auditorium, completed in 1924, was a state-of-the-art space built to be nonreverberant.

awful amplified music sounds in this old church, “It’s a just a clusterfuck. Man, it’s like a feedback loop when you’re in there” (Downer 2017). Thus, he conducts the event with no sound system, turning down the annual offers to sponsor one from those who see the absence of a PA system as a lack of resources rather than an aesthetic choice.

I step into the meandering, modal “Jenny in the Cotton Patch,” a tune I learned from a self-released recording made in the 1980s by Bob Douglas, who at the age of twenty-eight won Chattanooga’s All Southern Contest in 1928. In my mind, the piece feels like the right vintage, and it’s from the right place for this contest. Bob learned it from Clayton McMichen, who was another regular at the old contests, helping to organize and create buzz in the newspapers. I play with no accompaniment and feel vulnerable. This is compounded by the fact that there is no microphone with its thickening proximity effect to beef up a thin fiddle. “You really have to voice your instrument for an acoustic, truly sonic performance, the way it is supposed to be,” fiddler Mick Kinney and former contest judge explains about this performance setting (Hoff 2017: 16-17). I play with the room and explore the expressiveness of dynamics—subtly shifting the volume, pushing harder on the bow to pull out a particular phrase or note. I discover a certain drone that sounds particularly good: it reverberates in the room and registers in my chest. This mix of frequencies—a combination of fundamental A notes played on the G, D, and A strings, and the instrument’s overtones—swirl and stall above the stage, dropping heavily onto me, creating a dense blanketing resonance. After a couple of minutes, I end the tune.

The trebly smack of applause and yips and hoots of the audience layer over the resonance of my instrument. It feels good. I hold onto this feeling and step off the stage as Matt Downer steps onto it. The audience fades as he full-throatedly announces the next contestant. Later, I tell Matt about this overwhelming sound. He reflects, “It is a community experience. I mean the



audience is definitely part of what's happening there. There's nothing between the performer or the musicians and the audience. I mean, that room is acting as the instrument pretty much. And everybody inside it. *And it's happening*" (Downer 2017).

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### **Feedback, Listening as Participation, and Sociality**

Old-time is thinking music. Connoisseur listeners and players find it good to think with. Among the many things that the Great Southern is (a fiddlers' convention with a sonic twist and the largest Old-time event in Chattanooga that is attended by mostly uninitiated listeners), it is also a thought experiment—an effort to use old music to create a space where people can participate through listening and imagining together what the past might have sounded like. When Matt Downer tells me about the Great Southern, he can sound a bit like a guru leading some sort of Pauline Oliveros-inspired “deep listening” workshop (Oliveros 2005). He says “the room is the instrument” and that the absence of a sound system fosters “active listening” among attendees. In the event, his background in and reading about experimental music merges with his interest in Old-time.

Through the event and through his talk, Matt expresses a sentiment—a desire for unmediated encounters with the music—that circulates widely among contemporary Old-time musicians; because they are reliant on old recordings (and copies of copies of those old recordings) as sources of musical knowledge, expert players and listeners are perpetually intrigued by the music's mediation and circulation. “I think the least processed sound or the least mediated, commodified sound, especially with Old-time music, that you can get between the performer to the audience the better,” Matt explains, expressing a belief that shapes this event and hints at the kind of epistemological anxieties that many other musicians express (Downer

2017). They voice a preference for liveness and less mediation—qualities that they associate with rich, intimate music making experiences with friends at festivals, and ascribe, paradoxically, to the lo-fi old source recordings that were made live in the field or in early recording studios (even as some of them circulated commercially). Old-time expert listeners imagine these recording techniques to have been produced face-to-face in real time (Meintjes 2003). These preferences for liveness shape actions: many expert Old-time performers choose to perform acoustically when possible. “The last thing I want to see is cord spaghetti up on the stage and a bunch of mic stands when I go see a band play,” Matt tells me (Downer 2017). These preferences also shape actions around recording (see chapter 6), especially the decision to record live, face-to-face using old technologies.<sup>14</sup>

In these performances and at the Great Southern, Old-time listening connoisseurs are, following ethnomusicologist David Novak, “feeding their isolated listening into the scene” (Novak 2013:49).<sup>15</sup> Besides embodying a preference for unmediated liveness, this profoundly participatory event, “a focused listening environment” as Matt calls it, emerges from and hinges on his private listening practice (and the listening of like-minded attendees) that finds tremendous beauty, meaning, and creative energy in early commercial recordings and field recordings. It’s the world of wild, old 78s into which Matt pulled bandmates Daniel and Clark. It’s the world of field recordings, filled with the sounds of life, where Matt does his most intense, deeply-felt listening these days. This listening practice, built around felt energy attributed to live performances, structures the event.

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<sup>14</sup> Ironically, these preferences for liveness are largely shaped by close, long-term listening to older recordings that were made live but that are filled with noises, crackles, dropouts, and artifacts of the mediating technologies that allowed the moment of liveness to be captured.

<sup>15</sup> “Deadness,” he explains, “is a direct embodiment of technological reproduction in individual experiences of music” (Novak 2013:33).

At this event, the music's oldness becomes a deep creative resource filled with possibilities. The past becomes an elusive, energy-filled thing that, if folks participate properly, they might hear and feel. Matt's meaningful, affectively potent, private encounters with old recordings generate a particular kind of live, public event inspired by those private encounters. David Novak describes this interplay between liveness of social music events and the deadness of private audition as a "feedback loop" that "is about co-constitutive relationships between performance and media in the lives of listeners" (Novak 2013:30). In Old-time, co-constitutive relationships form between the experiences of hearing the liveness and energy of old recordings and experiences of feeling the liveness and energy in lived encounters hearing and making Old-time music. Even the intense, private listening is deeply social as it aims towards and feeds back into music making and creative projects. This rich, experiential relationship leads Old-time musicians to create new experiences, like the Great Southern, that experiment with mediation, at times minimizing, amplifying, and obscuring forms of mediation to explore the aesthetic of liveness.

However, even as the event places a premium on the imagined experience of sonic oldness, it relies on a modern kind of listening. Indeed, the Great Southern replicates the kind of listening experience into which modern listeners in the early 20th century would have been enculturated as they experienced performances by professional musicians in new, state-of-the-art, scientifically designed auditoriums (Thompson 2002). "Listening now became a way to worship at the temple of great art," historian Emily Thompson writes of the period between 1900 and 1930, as she describes the experiences of audiences who sought through earnest silence and rapt attention to hear what the scientifically designed auditoriums (the temples of the great art) of the period had to offer (Thompson 2002:47). As listening became sacrosanct, she observes,

listener's attitudes towards music also shifted; where amateur music making had once been a popular pastime among middle class Americans, it diminished as music became a professional pursuit to be performed in new, modern spaces. Thus modern listeners listened intently and respectfully to professionals and to modern spaces.

Even as the fiddlers' convention fosters a kind of modern listening (i.e., quiet, attentive, reverent), it inverts this form of listening and levels a critique at the professionalization of music making. Audience members are expected to listen reverently to amateur performers, whose performances range from excellent to crude. Likewise, rather than seeking to hear the sounds of scientifically empowered modernity made audible in a state-of-the-art auditorium, the convention listeners listen for the past. Like the modern listeners' investment in experiencing the best sounds that science could offer, listeners at the Great Southern invest in the project to hear the oldest sounds the event can conjure. For Matt, this investment—quiet, attentive listening—is a form of participation. Besides eschewing sound reinforcement, he cultivates a kind of respectful, participatory listening by hanging signs reading “QUIET PLEASE” at the doorways and enticing attendees to the event through newspaper interviews that play up the rarity of the acoustic experience. He tells me he loves seeing the way attendees participate, self-policing and enforcing a kind of respectful, attentive listening during performances.<sup>16</sup> Some attendees close

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<sup>16</sup> Even in the short space of an afternoon, attendees learn to participate as listeners in a certain kind of way. In Lila Ellen Gray's work with Portuguese Fado music—a music that hinges on the idea of soulfulness, she treats listening as a performative act: “People learn to perform their souls in the ways in which they listen: in silence, attentively, eyes closed, words uttered inaudibly like an incantation and maybe with tears” (2013:43). These and other performances of listening reveal “structures of listening,” a term inspired by Raymond Williams “structures of feeling” (Williams 1977). She explains: “With ‘structures of listening’ I play with common tropes of hearing and of listening—where they are linked to interiority, to feeling, to subjectivity—while foregrounding the sociability of listening, the sociality of hearing, and their emergent qualities” (Gray 2013:43). As I engage this concept, I am interested in the ways that that Old-time musicians, especially Matt Downer and participants at the Great Southern, reveal “structures of listening.” Of course, these grow out of his own listening practices.

their eyes and rock their bodies with the pulse of the tunes. Others pat time with a hand or foot. But generally, folks listen quietly.

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*Fiddle Contest Finals at the Great Southern  
Lindsay Street Hall  
Chattanooga, March 12, 2017*

It's too cold to jam outside this year, so many of the musicians have crammed in along the walls to listen to the fiddle finals—one of the last contests of the evening. Things are running late. Instrument cases fill the spaces between clusters of musicians. In a corner of the room is a gramophone and a pile of 78 RPM records that are played between contests. A little less than two hundred people sit quietly in folding chairs, paying close attention to the fiddler on stage. Kevin Martin plays a wild rendition of the “Lost Train Blues.”

It started snowing a bit earlier—a rarity in Chattanooga this time of year—and some of the audience left early, presumably to avoid a potential snowpocalypse. But most of the musicians have stuck around, listening, heckling each other, and quietly discussing the merits of each performance in the moments between contestants. A lot of us haven't seen each other since the last fiddlers' conventions the fall before, so it's a bit of a reunion. However, it's a very quiet reunion.

A friend in his late 20s, who between the moonshine that is being slyly passed around outside and the beer from the concession, has gotten drunk. A prize winning fiddler and banjo player, he's full of opinions about the music. In a room where people are really making an effort to be quiet, he's been leaning into my ear, giving me a running commentary on the performances at the drunken whisper volume level, which, of course, is pretty loud. I'm trying to figure out how to either slip away or get him to quiet down. But before I can hatch a plan, his nearly empty

bottle of Budweiser slips from his hand, careens off his foot and goes rolling towards the stage. (Apparently, the floors of the Lindsay Street Hall are not completely level.) As it rolls, the hollow glass bottle amplifies the sound of the hardwood floors, undergirding the fiddle tune with a brittle drumroll during its fifteen feet journey towards the stage. It comes to rest at the feet of the contest judges who sit at a table a few feet from the stage. The musicians around me, many of whom are as tipsy as the perpetrator, start to laugh, impressed at the distance covered by the bottle, astounded by how much noise it made, and amazed at its trajectory. Trying to stifle my own laughs, I look up just in time to lock eyes with an older woman in a pink sweater a few rows away. The message she broadcasts with her withering look is unmistakable. “Shut up and listen, you drunks.” She holds us in the gaze of her scorn for a few seconds before righteously shifting her attention back to the performance. We try to swallow our laughs, letting them simmer until the end of the piece and then erupt.

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As this form of imaginative, participatory listening does the political work of celebrating DIY, amateur music making, it also gives rise to a kind of sociality—a blurring of boundaries between stage and hall and performer and audience—that sets this event apart from most fiddlers’ conventions. Clark Williams, Matt’s former bandmate and the mastermind of the experimental Big Kitty project, describes the spirit of the event and these blurry social and sonic boundaries eloquently and incisively:

Attendees of the Great Southern soon discover that it is not a concert so much as a total immersion in music. Everywhere is behind the scenes. There are constant performances inside and outside, on the grounds and off, as fiddlers venture into the city and return to the convention like bees to the hive.

Modern event planners would be envious of the fiddlers' convention's natural interactivity. Anyone can perform, either to compete for the cash prizes at stake, or just for the hell of it. The Hall is alive with the sound and movement of performers ascending to and descending

from the stage in cross patterns. The doors stay wide open all day long. The sounds of passing cars enter and exit with the cool Spring breezes and scraps of outdoor conversation. Spectators come and go, producing a murmur of voices and shuffling feet as though they belonged to a single entity. The ringing strings of fiddle and banjo rest upon the compound of these gentle sounds like a fleck of gold on a mass of cotton. (Williams 2013)

The Great Southern exists as a large-scale listening project, playing out at the scale of city, in which a carefully constructed event allows local sounds, repertoire, and styles to be heard again in their home community. While sound technologies—the radio and commercial recording industry of the 1920s—were essential to the early convention’s growth, it is the minimization of these technologies—the absence of microphones and a PA system—that distinguish the Great Southern from other fiddlers’ conventions. While the 1920s iterations celebrated the oldness of old fiddling as emerging from an imagined, lily-white, pioneer-meets-plantation past, the contemporary Great Southern treats old fiddling as a pathway to an emergent social experience, constructed around a differently mediated, direct experience of historical music. It’s a space for Chattanoogaans to listen together. Through the event, Matt invites listeners to construct an aural imaginary that is about feeling connected through collective listening, being transported in time, and encountering creative energy more directly.

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*Figure 12 (above): Daniel Rothwell (banjo) accompanies Trenton Carruthers at the Great Southern Fiddlers' Convention, 11 March 2016. (photo by author)*

*Banjo Contest at the Great Southern, mid-afternoon,  
Lindsay Street Hall, Chattanooga,  
March 11, 2016*

A dog yips in the back of the Lindsay Street Hall. The audience laughs. From the left side of the stage, Matt looks at a sheet of paper with contestants on it and yells, “Up next from Smyrna, Tennessee, Mister Daniel Rothwell.” Daniel Rothwell is a college-aged expert banjo player who lives with cerebral palsy. Raised in middle Tennessee, he has become an expert on the history of Old-time music around his home. He’s just played banjo behind his teenager friend Trenton “Tater” Carruthers’ fiddle contest pieces, and is already sitting on the stage. Realizing that he’s left his fiddle outside where he was jamming earlier, he asks the audience, “Anyone got a fiddle I can borrow?”



From the left side of the hall, where a handful of musicians have gathered to listen along the wall and wait their turn, a musician responds, “You need a fiddle Daniel? I got one you can borrow.” The local, teenager musician known as Tater, who’s just stepped off the stage offers Daniel his own, but Daniel wants one with a chin rest. In mock rejection, Tater works the audience of about two hundred people for a few chuckles, “Oh good grief, I can’t satisfy.” The same musician who offered his fiddle a moment before insists that Daniel borrow his instrument, “It’d be my pleasure, man. I’ll give you mine.” Another musician across the room offers his shoulder rest. The space comes alive as participants cobble together a workable setup, hashing out the details across the hall. After sourcing a workable instrument, Daniel realizes he’s missing his accompanist, “Guitar player, where are you? Chris Gray? Please report to the building here.” His announcement is particularly funny because it’s the kind of announcement that usually comes through a PA system, but, in this case, it’s just yelled out into the room.

The audience chuckles and begins to murmur. Another musician slips out of the hall to go and retrieve Chris from the jams happening on the lawn beside the hall. Just as the wait begins to feel a bit awkward, a middle-aged woman hollers, “We love you, Daniel.” A sign of their care, the audience claps. They’re along for the ride, and there’s no harm in spreading some love around. A loquacious entertainer, Daniel has been caught unprepared, “People are sure liking me being quiet, aren’t they? Mercy.” A minute passes before Chris Grey rambles into the hall, guitar case in hand. He strides up to the stage and pulls out his guitar. Immersed in the drama, the audience applauds his arrival. “Alright, what are we playing there, hoss?” Chris asks, strumming his chord.

“We’re going to do you an old timer, one called the Grey Eagle in the key of A major,” Daniel informs the audience.

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*Jamming on the lawn at the Great Southern, late afternoon  
Lindsay Street Hall, Chattanooga,  
March 11, 2016*

On a quarter acre rectangular lawn on the side of the Lindsay Street Hall, listeners—fellow musicians and attendees—orbit between a dozen small circles of music making with three to five players sitting knee-to-knee, playing a wild sampling of Old-time music. Their sounds overlap. Players reconfigure in new groups after sessions break up every few hours or when a player or band needs to slip inside to compete. A concession table sends a steady stream of hot dogs, tallboys of Budweiser, bottles of Heineken, and Coca-Cola into the yard. The weather, a potentially dicey prospect at the beginning of March in southeast Tennessee, feels appropriately spring-like—clouds flit through the sky, and a cotton shirt provides all the warmth needed.

The competitions continue inside, moving from a banjo contest, to a fiddle contest, and now, in the early evening, to a band contest. Although some players take these contests very seriously, more treat them as an opportunity to have fun, showcase pieces they've been woodshedding, entertain local audiences, and maybe win a little prize money. Pickup bands struggle to get their intros and outros in place for the contest, working under the premise that if you can at least start and stop together you can let the stuff in-between play out in whatever fashion it will. Actual bands warm up, tweaking harmonies and tempos, refining the interplay between fiddle and banjo, or settling into a groove.

I join a pick-up band with some friends, mostly in their mid to late twenties. They are all serious listeners and players. Several perform in bands that specialize in playing, among other things, the rowdy repertoires of 1920s string bands from North Georgia like the Skillet Lickers and Earl Johnson. Kevin Martin, who grew up in the suburbs of Atlanta, organizes our efforts

and fiddles with me. Kevin recently quit his job at a music licensing company and has started playing full-time, singing and playing honky-tonk and western swing with his Nashville-based band, the Cowpokes. He still plays Old-time powerfully, having cultivated a bow arm that can capture the shuffling rhythms of Lowe Stokes and the smooth longer bow of Clayton McMichen—both fixtures in Chattanooga’s 1920s scene. Casey Meikle, who looks like Clark Kent in a pearl button shirt, is also fiddling. He plays in Kevin Martin’s Old-time band, the raucous Nashville-based Hogslop String Band. Kevin Samuels, who works as a waiter in Asheville, plays bass. Record collector and South Carolina native Van Birchfield contributes his 78-informed guitar runs. Atlantan Chip Corbett, in his mid-forties from Atlanta, plays banjo with us. He’s no stranger to the feel that we’re going for: his performances with the Atlanta-based Georgia Crackers are built around a 1920s North Georgia sound and repertoire.

In the calculus of fiddle contests, some contestants attempt to pay homage to local styles and repertoires in hopes that judges will appreciate it and that audiences will be flattered. We follow this path and throw together a rough and rowdy version of the classic “Leather Britches”—a warhorse tune at the 1920s Great Southern, but likely considered a bit cliché in the contemporary moment in which players often select archaic pieces. Our version finds its inspiration in the hyperactive three fiddle sound of the Georgia Skillet Lickers, who were regular performers at the festival.

Finding a quieter place in the yard up against a fence, we rehearse a bit. It feels like riding a bike with questionable brakes down a steep, curvy hill. How do you rehearse reckless abandon and wildness? How do you translate the energy of a recording made ninety years ago into your own performance? Our three fiddles cover a lot of sonic ground, sometimes playing the melody in unison and sometimes playing an octave. There’s no real plan beyond just busting

down and riding it out. Van plays a series of syncopated bass runs, emulating the Skillet Licker's Riley Puckett's wandering guitar accompaniment. After ten minutes of rehearsal, we head inside and deliver a wooly performance that earns us second place.

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*After Party at Matthew Hamilton's House, evening  
North Chattanooga  
March 11, 2016*

Around 10:00 PM, after the convention, about thirty participants head from the venue to Matthew Hamilton's house across the Tennessee River. The old three-bedroom bungalow is tucked on a steep street in hilly, gentrifying North Chattanooga. In his mid-twenties, Matthew grew up in Chattanooga, works as a contractor, and is becoming a solid fiddler and guitarist. He's a key player in a fledgling scene of younger players who've been making Old-time music in Chattanooga. They've been jamming informally, digging into the local, historical repertoire, and are getting really good. Matthew warned his neighbors beforehand that things might be noisy. Folks trickle in, carrying instrument cases, brown paper bags of booze, twelve packs of cheap beer, and bags of chips. Walking through the stuffy, crowded living room where one group has already gathered to play tunes and others chat on the couches that have been pushed to the wall, I reach the kitchen, where Matthew buzzes around, welcoming his guests, plying them with food, and tending to his two large pots of chicken and dumplings (one being vegetarian). We eat and talk. His dog winds its way through the crowd, greeting people with a wet nose in hopes of scoring some leftovers. It being March, many folks haven't seen each other since the end of festival season in September. There's a good bit of catching up to do, both relationally and musically. One of the earliest conventions in the year, the Great Southern begins to scratch the

itch. The after-party distills the festival into a smaller gathering of friends from around the region. It's a good hang.

Winter months can be lonely. Come fall, the face-to-face excess of summer festivals and the potential to connect with Old-time musicians from around the country (or world) evaporates, giving way to leaner, lonelier local scenes that sustain musical practices over the winter. Depending on where you live, these scenes can be good or bad, but, in all cases, the community constricts. Mediocre local jams replace the raging, hand-picked sessions of summer festivals. Small house parties might fill the gap, allowing friendships to be maintained and allowing players to get excited about a new tune or two. Meanwhile, serious players woodshed. They peruse their hard drives for undiscovered gems—tunes that might not be in circulation. They unearth, polish, and cut these gems, listening deeply to and developing their own versions of old recordings. Even the seeming isolation of woodshedding is a deeply social activity. Through emails, Facebook posts, and phone calls, connoisseur listener/learners guide each other towards new listening materials or new favorite source musicians. Anticipation of the grooving session during the summer drives players to refine their skills and learn new tunes over the winter.

For many of the folks at Matthew's, tonight is the first chance to spring the woodshed material on their friends and to rekindle the summer festival vibe. And the partygoers are hard at it. Sessions spring up—in the living room, in a bedroom, in the basement, in the kitchen. Their sounds overlap and fill the house. There's no escaping the music. Sessions form, break up, and reconvene in new places. Matt Downer shows up, worn out from his organizational duties but hungry to make some music, and plays guitar in a session that blasts through the raucous repertoire of 1920s fiddle hero Earl Johnson. An impromptu square dance erupts in the living room. The floor heaves a bit in time to the music. On the front porch, Chris Ryan sings classic

country songs from George Jones. Listeners chime in on choruses, between quiet conversation, sips of booze, and drags off of cigarettes. Around 3:00 AM, a half-dozen people stand on the back deck in a chilly drizzle and recount the events of the day. Through the door, in the warm kitchen, folks stand and make music while others sit on the counters and listen. The party rolls on.

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## **Conclusion**

Since the 1990s, Chattanooga's scene has grown and become more visible. Although Don Sarrell passed away at that age of 68 in May of 2002, the Mountain Opry continues. His presence is still felt there: a yellowed newspaper clipping celebrating his winning the National Old-time Banjo Championship sometime in the 1990s hangs on a bulletin board to the right of the stage and a few photographs of him, curling at the edges, sit in the glass display case across from the concession stand. The venue continues to nurture players along. Since the mid-2000s, there has been a weekly all-comers Old-time jam, hosted at various restaurants and bars around the city. From the founding of the Chattanooga Folk School in 2009 by Old-time musician Christie Burns until its closing in 2015, Chattanooga could take courses in Old-time fiddle, banjo, guitar, mandolin, and dulcimer, or participate in learning jams. Nationally known performers now make stops to play shows at smaller venues in the city like the cozy listening room, the Barking Legs Theater. The kind of music party that Matthew Hamilton hosted and the scene of younger players would have been difficult to imagine ten or fifteen years ago. Currently, Old-time music exists in Chattanooga as one of the more visible participatory musics. In this way, it's not so different from Old-time scenes around the country, where players gather at a bar for a few hours on a

Tuesday or Wednesday night to play through a repertoire that might be culled from West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia, Mississippi, Georgia, Virginia, and North Carolina.<sup>17</sup>

However, there is something more going on in Chattanooga. Paying attention to local events and local actors reveals a story about sustained music making beyond the revival. In discussing the variety of banjo styles and the ethos of the Mountain Opry, I've shown the kinds of spaces and diverse performances that have sustained the music over the long haul in places like Chattanooga and a handful of other southern communities that have been eclipsed by a Round Peak-centric revival story (or even a generic revival story). Unsurprisingly, outside of the middle class Old-time cohort, musicians maintain music making traditions while exploring new sounds and techniques (that at times bewilder members of the middle class cohort) (Turino 2008). These scenes are often marked by generous, inviting, and creative approaches to music and genre. Excellent performances tend to entertain as much as they replicate. Purity and authenticity matter less in these scenes than pleasure and entertainment.

My treatment of Old-time as a listening music, and my attention to expert music makers, leads to unexpected conclusions. My conversations with Matt and a handful of other musicians reveal that the cultivation and circulation of Old-time music are not unthinking exercises in nostalgia; nor are they some kind of orgy of indiscriminate participatory music making or some kind of stifling revival re-creation. To the contrary, these Old-time's listening connoisseurs treat Old-time as thinking music and theorize its mediation, its performance, and its role in social life. Some musicians, like Matt, find critical inspiration and intellectual genealogies in unexpected places (e.g. John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, glitch music). In Matt's case, these sources of

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<sup>17</sup> A bumper sticker "Old-time music, better than it sounds" circulates through the community and expresses this sentiment. Many Old-time musicians view the music and their participation in it as a kind of less-than music. For whatever reasons, they minimize its beauty, complexity, artfulness, and the demands that it makes on serious practitioners.

inspiration are tempered and blended with local understandings of the music, inherited from elder musicians like Matt's grandfather, Cast King, and Jess Moore. They're there, waiting to bubble up in a heady conversation.

By choosing to understand Old-time music as a less-mediated, more social and participatory thinking music that is conducive to new kinds of listening, musicians treat Old-time as an outlet for creative energy and a site for performance and participation through which they can enact new, closer-knit social experiences and relationships, built around music making, dance, and listening, in the face of the social alienation and consumerism of 21st century American life. As they listen deeply, the music's oldness transforms into a resource for the creation of new art and experiences. "Structures of listening," rooted in a long-term engagement with old recordings, shape these feeling-filled encounters with an old music in the present (Gray 2013).



## Chapter 4

### **Winding and Unwinding the Clock: Emulating, Oscarizing, and Grooving as Relating**

*Charles Higgins's house  
Whitwell, Tennessee  
Evening of July 21, 2011*

A half hour drive northwest of Chattanooga, after you climb over the first east-facing finger of the Cumberland Plateau or follow the Tennessee River as it slices through it, you find yourself in the Sequatchie Valley. The Sequatchie River winds its way southwest from the valley's head down to the Tennessee River. Many notable Old-time fiddlers have called the valley home, from coal miner turned old fiddling champion Jess Young to his protégé Clint Kilgore to Shorty Bridgeman and Tom and Bob Douglas (Decosimo 2006). From the verdant, rolling floor of the Sequatchie Valley at the former coal mining community of Whitwell, it's a ten-minute drive up the Cumberland Plateau to Old-time guitar players Charles Higgins's house. Russet sandstone bluffs loom over the road as it winds up the mountain. A turn leads to Charles's place; a well-tended apple orchard and a vegetable garden fill a few acres across the lane from his house. The road continues past two of his children's houses and the homeplace where he grew up.

On this evening in late July, Charles, his banjo and guitar playing son Tim, and I walk through the orchard and the garden. It's warm and the air is thick, but the two thousand-or-so-foot elevation of the plateau provides a welcome break from the sweltering heat of Chattanooga. Charles, a year or so shy of seventy, moves through his garden with deliberateness. He is a thick, powerful man who plays thick, powerful music—the kind of music that makes your ears ring

long after the session is over. He's also an exceedingly kind and generous person who cares deeply about this place and its music. This evening, Charles wears a nice pair of overalls and a dress shirt. A trucker cap, with the letters of local AM station WLIJ, rides atop a thick head of grey hair.

Charles's son Tim, an equally thick man in his forties joins us as we stroll down tidy paths between Charles' apple trees that have produced blue ribbon winning apples at local fairs. It really is a beautiful and carefully tended space, compared to the suburbanized landscape of Signal Mountain—a finger of the same plateau where I grew up just across the valley towards Chattanooga. Charles tells me about his apples. He's soft-spoken, and the snappy cadence of his speech requires me to lean in to hear him. Over the last couple of decades, he's planted twenty-five varieties of apples. We walk around, joking, talking, inspecting his garden (sweet potatoes, tomatoes, potatoes, melons), enjoying the late summer light until we hear the crunch of gravel as Bob Townsend, who has just driven over from Coalmont, pulls up to Charles's house across the road.

We make our way over and greet him. In his mid 50s, Bob Townsend is a compact, fit man who sports a tidy brown mustache below a pair of smart glasses. Both his music and appearance have a precise edge to them. Bob grabs his fiddle case, and we head inside to play some tunes. We enter the house Charles built through a high-ceilinged living room and turn right down a carpeted hallway. A few steps more and a left turn and we're in an old bedroom that he's converted into his music room. We sit down in a tight circle of folding chairs, and pull our instruments out.

Sitting down to start a session, especially with old friends whom you rarely see, is like standing with your toes dangling over the edge of bluff and preparing to jump into a lake.

There's excitement that wells up in your chest. There's a delightful uncertainty in not knowing where the music will lead, which tunes will click, and whether you'll even find the groove. For me, this evening feels like a homecoming—a chance to reconnect with old music friends in the area I consider to be my musical home. It's a chance to realign my own playing with Bob's deeply rooted fiddling and with Charles's rhythm guitar groove. It's also chance to hear more of the rare, local tunes that Bob learned from recordings that Charles made of his fiddling neighbor Oscar Overturf while he was living. For the last two decades, Bob has been poring over the field recordings that Charles made of local musicians in the 1970s and 80s, cultivating a regional style and repertoire. In particular, Bob has focused his attention on the playing of Charles's dear friend Oscar Overturf, and, in spite of never having met him, has managed to create a sound and feel that Charles thinks is pretty close.

I first heard Bob Townsend and Charles Higgins at Signal Mountain's Mountain Opry in May, 2001. I had skipped my high school graduation party to play banjo with Charlie Acuff—an older fiddler from Alcoa, Tennessee. Along with local legend Norman Blake and early Country star Charlie Louvin, Charlie's band the Lantana Drifters had been booked to play at a concert celebrating the life of local fiddler Bob Douglas, who had recently died at 101. I was playing banjo with Charlie Acuff's band, the Lantana Drifters. When Bob and Charles took the stage, I was shocked: I had no idea that there were local players who were playing the kind of regionally-rooted Old-time music that they were. Their playing meshed perfectly. Their tunes, even the familiar ones, were filled with unexpected twists and a loping rhythm. Their music has been an inspiration since. Over the years, I have jammed with them at volunteer fire halls and in their homes. I've played gigs with them, from dances to Fourth of July parties. When Charles and Tim have been busy, I've been in bands with Bob.

All the while, I've been trying to get a grip on the repertoire and style that Bob has carefully cultivated from Charles's recordings. I even got a grant one summer to study Oscar's fiddling for a few days with Bob. The abiding sense of responsibility that Charles feels to Oscar has led him to keep a tight grip on his recordings of his deceased friend, and Bob is one of the only people to whom he has granted access to the recordings. Thus, Bob is my (and the rest of the Old-time scene's) link to Oscar's repertoire and style. Their 2001 "Old-time Fiddlin' Tunes from the South Cumberland," recorded live by Bob at his house, has circulated Bob's rendering of Oscar's music globally—as far as Japan and Australia, Bob tells me. It also led to opportunities to perform and teach on national stages.

To sit down for a music session with these musicians is a chance to draw closer to something old and deeply rooted in place and relationships. It is a chance to make music with players who make their music with a sense of responsibility to each other and to the absent players who inspire them. However, even after years of making music with them, I still feel like a bit of an interloper from the upper middle class suburbs, and now out-of-state in graduate school. Yet they generously welcome me into their music making and their long-term relationships that have formed around music making. Although I've heard Old-time players from all over—the U.S., Canada, Japan, Australia, England—play some of Bob, Charles, and Tim's tunes at summer festivals and camps, I haven't gotten to play with them in a year or so, and it's a thrilling prospect to sit down and share some tunes and talk with them.

Figure 13 (below): Charles Higgins in his orchard, Whitwell, Tennessee, 21 July 2011. (photo by author)



Figure 14 (below): Charles Higgins in his orchard, Whitwell, Tennessee, 21 July 2011. (photo by author)



Figure 15 (below): Charles Higgins in his orchard, Whitwell, Tennessee, 21 July 2011. (photo by author)



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## **Winding up**

In focusing on Bob Townsend’s Old-time music making, this chapter will illustrate a process of splitting, fixing, unfixing, and embodying sounds as it plays out in the midst of musical relationships in Tennessee’s Cumberland Plateau region (Chion 2016, Schafer 1994).<sup>1</sup> Through assiduous listening, enabled by older analog and newer digital technologies, sounded performances are retrieved from the fixed, archival realm of the field recording and rendered into real time, embodied, face-to-face music making. The subtle details of technique, especially bow motions, matter immensely in this music and underpin the stories and poetics of this chapter, allowing contemporary players to honor players long gone, like Oscar, and render them audible and incarnate in the present. Similar learning and listening processes play out among most contemporary experts in Old-time music, and the stakes are high; in the absence of a resume that includes deep, face-to-face encounters with a departed generation of masters, a performed mastery of old recordings becomes the next most respectable form of knowledge, earning a player respect, blue ribbons, sought-after instructional opportunities, and the potential to make a living as a professional Old-time musician. As the preceding chapters make clear, contemporary players must reckon with oldness in all its unwieldy manifestations, and old recordings serve nicely in the absence of old masters.

Although the story of Charles, Bob, and Tim illuminates this broader learning process, it differs significantly from more typical unemplaced Old-time music making and learning; theirs

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<sup>1</sup> The extraction of sound from the body and its fixing as a recording has been a source of anxiety and a theoretical problem for some time. R Murray Schafer famously coined the phrase “schizophonia” to describe the splitting of sounds from their sources through the industrial process of recording. This split, he argues, is symptomatic of modernity. Following Michel Chion, I use the word “fix” to highlight a particular “technological effect.” He explains that the term phonofixation “covers any process that consists not only in ‘fixing’ existing sounds (concerts, personal or historical events, etc.) but also in producing, in a studio session, sounds specifically intended for inscription onto the medium” (2016: 135).

is a story of local musical traditions *mediated* and *sustained* through social relationships, memory, and carefully tended reels of tape that document earlier relationships, repertoires, and styles. While many older canonical Old-time recordings circulate widely (and freely) online and are easily accessible, these recordings, particularly those of Oscar's playing, are carefully guarded, circulating in a minute, limited network formed through Charles and Bob's intimate, long-term musical and social relationships. A profound sense of mutual responsibility and a responsibility to those who are absent limits its circulation and shapes Bob's interpretation and performance. As he scrutinizes the recordings of Oscar, Bob reconfigures his approach to fiddling to match Oscar's approach and to satisfy himself and Charles, or as he says, he "Oscarizes" tunes. In doing so, he comes to recognize himself as "Charles's fiddler." In turn, Charles feels Oscar's presence in Bob's playing and changes his guitar groove to a "double-shuffle" picking pattern. Their musical and social relationship intensifies. Bob emulates Oscar and allows Charles to experience music that feels like the music he made with Oscar. Oscar is recalled and honored. Bob becomes a "surrogate" for Oscar, allowing his musical presence and the local style he performed to continue into the present (Roach 1996).<sup>2</sup>

Fidelity, in its many meanings, shapes the story of Bob's effort to embody Oscar's music. Fidelity, as I conceive it, relates not only to signal-to-noise ratios like the challenges Bob faced in encountering muffled field recordings of Oscar, but also to the strength and intimacy of social relationships. I describe these sounded relationships as shifting from hi-fi sociality (the original Charles/Oscar music making) to lo-fi sociality (the mediated listening to the field tapes) back to

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<sup>2</sup> "Surrogation" is what performance studies scholar Joseph Roach calls this sort of ongoing processes through which "culture reproduces and re-creates itself" as survivors attempt to fill "cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure" (1996: 2). I describe an instance of *mediated surrogation*, in which sound technologies play a vital role in the cultivation of the surrogate. There could be no surrogate here without the reels of tape documenting the music.

hi-fi sociality (the Charles/Bob music making that is reminiscent of and always referring to that earlier coupling) (Meintjes 2017, Schafer 1994). These social and musical relationships wax and wane over time. They wax as they strengthen through processes of learning, and performing, as Oscar and Charles and, later, Bob and Charles cultivate relationships. They wane through processes of loss, as Oscar's death leaves Charles without a musical partner and friend.

Consequently, these individuals and their biographies matter deeply. I spend the first half of the chapter sketching out the biography of Charles, which is largely a story of work, and then of Bob, which is largely a biography of a different kind of labor—the labor of musical learning. Work and talk about work matter in Appalachia and in this part of Tennessee (Sawin 2004). Work intertwines with the artistry of Charles and Bob, intensifying the pleasures of music making and shaping their relationship to their music. A clearer picture of genre emerges through these lived histories and the entanglements of place, class, work, memory, and musical practice. This picture reminds us that even now, when it seems that Old-time has transformed into an unemplaced, middle class musical pursuit, there are still working-class musicians working hard at making music that reflects the place they call home.<sup>3</sup>

With these key actors in place, the second half of the chapter examines the process of “emulation,” as Bob and Charles call it, in three phases: “Unfixing Oscar,” “Embodying Oscar,” and “Getting a Groove Going” (or “Mediating Oscar”). The result of this process is the “Oscarizing” of Bob (or the “Bobizing” of Oscar) and the cultivation of a deep sense of responsibility and intimacy among these players. Through the intimate, dialogic, and embodied

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<sup>3</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter, but I wish to acknowledge other players around the American South engaged in projects similar to Bob, Charles, and Tim. These players work diligently to sustain local and familial music, resisting more generic, less nuanced, *festivalized* approaches to making Old-time music (see chapter 4 for a discussion of the term *festivalized*). Many of them go unrecognized and underappreciated. Any effort to list these players would result in unintended omissions. I hope that in telling this particular story, they might feel some sense of pride and recognition.



processes of careful, intense listening and emulation, Bob comes to know, hear, and feel his music in terms of Oscar's (Feld 1998).<sup>4</sup>

Two more threads wind their way through this chapter, both of which will be of concern to those interested in contemporary Old-time music. An evening of tunes and talk—a jam session with Charles, Tim, and Bob at Charles's house—works its way throughout, framing the larger story. Most importantly, it gives a sense of the feeling, talk, and music that mark jams as a key site of sociality in the music. Jam sessions differ from place to place, but I try here to capture a sense of what a session is like among musicians on Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau who understand themselves to be part of a local tradition.

The second thread is my consideration of tunes—a foundational component of the genre for scholars and practitioners alike (see Woolf 1990). Jeff Todd Titon observes that tunes serve as a kind of currency among contemporary players (2001). They certainly gain players cultural and social capital. Fiddlers, who are expected to lead sessions, are valued for both their ability to play and the breadth and depth of their repertoire. However, this story reveals a whole other range of meanings that can inhere in tunes and invites us to consider tunes as processes. These meanings suggest an alternative, deeply felt, ethical way of knowing and making this music. Tunes, rendered with the proper technique and feel, open a pathway to channel Oscar's memory. Tunes, linked to lived experiences with absent players, invite stories that reinvigorate social bonds. Rare tunes, recovered from Charles's private archive, become a source for the pleasures and frustrations of learning, something to be intimately known over years and shared among

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<sup>4</sup> Steven Feld's term "intervocality" highlights the intimacy of this process. Feld describes the intimacy achieved through listening back repeatedly to recordings, mimicking, and speaking alongside the recorded voice of his Bosavi consultants. "*Intervocality*" he writes, "is a term I use to signify the inherently dialogic and embodied qualities of speaking and hearing. Intervocality underscores the link between the felt audition of one's own voice, and the cumulatively embodied experience of aural resonance and memory" (Feld 1998: 471).

close friends. Local tunes, rooted in the sandy soil of the Cumberland Plateau, become a way of performing, feeling, and knowing a place. For Bob, Charles, and Tim, tunes become an avenue to show respect and care for each other and those whose presence haunts their music making.

### **Part I: A Biography of Social Relations**

#### **Charles Higgins**

“This place out here,” Charles tells me, referring to the community around his home, “there was no work in the 1950s, especially for young men.” The story that Charles tells—one of coming of age in mid-century Appalachia—mirrors the migration and return home of many other working-class Appalachian men of his generation. Other stories about work run through the music sessions I’ve shared with Charles, Bob, and Tim.<sup>5</sup> In telling me about work and related struggles that shaped his life, Charles positions himself in his community as a hard worker and reminds me not to mistake the music he makes for the whole of himself (cf. Sawin 2004: 50). His quest to find work outside of the region, his return home, and the subsequent resume of work make his relationship to the music, especially to the music and musicians from *this* place on the Cumberland Plateau, make more sense. Digging into his neighbors’ music was a way to root himself back in his home after the demands of work had taken him away. It was a way to reconnect. Playing gigs and sharing music for events around Whitwell allowed Charles to reconnect and participate in his community. But, Charles reminds me, music was and is just one part of who he is.

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<sup>5</sup> During my visits with Charles, Tim, and Bob, talk has often turned to hardships, limited opportunities for work, and the demands of physical labor. All three band members have done work that taxed their bodies. Bob spent a decade working in the coal mines until they shut down in 1988, including witnessing a mine explosion in 1981 that killed thirteen miners in the Whitwell community. After the mines shut down, Bob worked at the Lodge Foundry and then the Wheland Foundry in Chattanooga. It was during this last bout of work that he began a course of study at a community college. Tim rises early each day and commutes to Chattanooga to work at Chattanooga Boiler and Tank. Like Bob, he also spent time working in the Lodge Foundry. There’ve been visits when a work injury impacted his playing, making playing painful or awkward. These players have made their livings doing hard work.

Charles was raised in the same rural community where he now lives, up the mountain from the coal mining community of Whitwell. He paints a picture of a hardscrabble childhood where electricity didn't arrive until the 1950s and where families kept gardens and raised hogs to get by:

What people around here don't understand is that people like us, we couldn't afford anything. We did good to have something on the table and get clothes on our back. Now that's true. Bob'll tell you the same thing. I asked my mother to buy me a guitar for three dollars from a lady who lived right up the road here. . . . I couldn't get it because I didn't have money.<sup>6</sup>

Eventually, he got a mandolin and began messing around with it. His family was full of musicians. His father played a down-stroke style on the banjo in which fingers brush down across the banjo strings.<sup>7</sup> His uncle Henry fiddled. Relatives on both sides, uncles and cousins, made music.

However, the struggle to find work led him away from his home and musical family. As he came of age, local work was elusive. There were the mines that bore deep under the east-facing edge of the Cumberland Plateau. His father worked in them and served as the president of the local miners' union. But by the time Charles was old enough to join him in the mines, his father, believing that the mining was too dangerous, insisted that Charles work elsewhere. When Charles did try to get a job there, his father pulled some strings and thwarted his efforts. During the 1950s, he struck off from home. He worked jobs in Indiana, Chicago, Florida, and Texas, and eventually, at the age of nineteen, wound up in California, where he stocked shelves in a chain

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<sup>6</sup> Besides the jam session vignettes, the quotations from Charles Higgins come from a conversation with him in 2010 (see Higgins 2010).

<sup>7</sup> His father purchased a Victrola in the 1940s, digging and selling ginseng to make up the cost.

store.<sup>8</sup> While he was out there, he traded an old car for an electric guitar and a Trutone amp and began figuring out how to play the thing.

Charles returned home around 1970, picking up work in a shoe factory die room, and later as a boilermaker, carpenter, ironworker, electrician, and handyman. It was around the time he returned home that he began to reconnect with local music, learning how to accompany fiddle tunes on the guitar. He purchased a reel-to-reel recorder and began making recordings of local musicians. Even then, Charles sensed that the music was changing and that it, especially Oscar Overturf's style and repertoire, was worth documenting. "Them old timers played different than what people play today," he told me recently. With two girls and two boys to raise and a substantial commute to Chattanooga, it's amazing that he found the time and energy to do much with music. Besides documenting a musician whom he loved, he was also documenting his growing family: the high-pitched voices of Charles's young sons punctuate the recordings, interrupting the music at times with squeals and questions. To purchase a tape recorder and tape would have been a significant investment for Charles during a lean time. This point is essential to grasping the relationships that these musicians have to Charles's field recordings. The reels represent both rare performances and hard-earned money. These field recordings were not made from some position of urban, elite or institutional privilege—a Seeger, Lomax, or whoever.

"I started playing with Oscar in about 1970, when I first met him," Charles tells me about his early efforts to play backup guitar with Oscar, adding, "And he had quit playing for twenty years." He continues, "I had seen him: He was a deputy sheriff in Grundy County for a while. And I'd speed past him every once in a while. . . . A neighbor—a friend of mine that I'd played at church with—we went to Oscar's house, and he introduced me to Oscar. And I got Oscar to

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<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, his fiddling cousin Bryson Higgins had followed the well-trod path that led from Appalachia to Indiana.

start trying to play a little bit.” Even after a twenty year hiatus, Oscar’s playing was powerful, “When I first heard what he was doing on that fiddle, son, it literally blowed me away. I’d hit a chord every once and awhile. I didn’t know anything about playing behind a fiddle anyway. . . . As he was coming back to what he was doing, I was learning what he was doing.” The developing relationship was mutually beneficial: both Oscar and Charles were learning together—Oscar recalling the tunes he had played years before, and Charles learning how to accompany a fiddler. Over the next eighteen years, Oscar shaped Charles’s music and understanding of Old-time fiddling (a dynamic that Charles would replicate later in his relationship with Bob).

Oscar, who was born in 1900, lived close to Charles on the Cumberland Plateau, in the Greutli-Laager community, allowing them to make music regularly. Aside from a stint working in Florida, a few years during the 1940s working in textile mills in Asheville, North Carolina, and a bit of time working in the Midwest, Oscar spent his life on the Cumberland Plateau. He had learned to fiddle from his father when he was seven years old and eventually achieved local fame playing for square dances and at fiddle contests.<sup>9</sup> In our visits and during jam sessions, Charles tells stories that bring Oscar back to life and remind us that the pleasure of this music is also the pleasure of friendship. There’s the story about how Oscar enjoyed dancing and would feign injuries when he went to nearby square dances, wrapping his fingers or hand in a bandage so that folks would let him dance instead of fiddle. Other stories celebrate his exceptional skill,

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<sup>9</sup> Oscar Overturf shows up in 1972 in *The Sewanee Purple*, the student newspaper for the preppy University of the South, as a kind of time traveler, emerging from the time of Shakespeare and bearing an untainted, alabaster tradition: “A special favorite was Mr. Oscar Overturf of Gruetli-Laager, Tenn. His unaccompanied fiddling full of the genuine flavor of yesteryear, was unspoiled by the commercialism we come to expect in country music. This is certainly how Overturf’s forefathers’ music must have sounded like in the England of ‘Good Queen Bess’” (Hoedown Lowdown 1972). This reporter understands Oscar’s music as old and white. Interestingly, Oscar’s repertoire, particularly his tune “Altamont,” overlaps with African American repertoires from just below his home on the Cumberland Plateau.

like the story about a fiddle contest in Tracy City, in which Oscar bested one of Bill Monroe's fiddlers, that Charles tells with delight, "Oscar told me, he said this old guy tightened up his bow, got up on the stage, said, 'Boy I'm going to pull a wicked bow tonight.' Oscar said he got started playing, he [Oscar] said 'Old boy you better pull a whole lot wickeder than that.' Oscar got up there and played, and that old guy jumped up on the stage and went to buckdancing, 'Give it to him, give it to him!'" This outsider fiddler recognized the greatness of Oscar's playing and couldn't help but dance to it. From around 1970 until 1988, when Oscar died, Charles cultivated a friendship with him and filled reels with his friend's music (along with the music of a handful of other local musicians). "He was one of the best. At that time, there was a lot of good fiddling going on," Charles tells me, naming all the other skilled fiddlers in his community. But Oscar's music was exception and he feared it would die with him.

What began as a musical relationship grew into a deep friendship. A Higgins family photo album has a page or two dedicated to Oscar. Other images of him are scattered among the school photos of Charles and Louise's four children and family snapshots. There are pictures of birthday gatherings with Oscar. There are other pictures of musical gatherings at Oscar's house, musicians and family



*Figure 16 (above): A newspaper clipping from the Higgins' family scrapbook, Charles Higgins on guitar and Oscar Overturf fiddling. (photo by author)*

scattered around the living room. In the pictures, Oscar is a lanky man, a bit over six feet tall, with blue eyes and wispy white hair, slicked back. Both Tim and Charles remember the pleasure Oscar found in the music; when he'd finish a particularly satisfying tune, he'd lean back and run

his hands through that little wisp of hair and declare, “Whoop dee doo.” “Oh, he loved it though,” Charles tells me, “Man, he did he ever love it. He’d get in there, and boy he’d get really with it, and he’d holler ‘Whoop de do!’ and run his hands through his hair—what hair he had.” A fiddle tune and a good music session were things of pleasure.

After Oscar died in 1988, Charles became the steward of his memory. Besides the with reels of Oscar’s music, Charles hung onto Oscar’s old fiddle (grooves worn deep into the fingerboard from years of playing), some photos of their time together, and a handful of stories. When some historically-minded local musicians raised funds to build a memorial to musicians who’d made music around the Sequatchie Valley—what became known locally as the



*Figure 17 (above): Photograph of a photograph of Charles Higgins accompanying fiddler Clint Kilgore as Oscar Overturf looks on. (photo by author)*

“Bluegrass Memorial”—Charles made certain that Oscar’s name was etched in the granite. Occasionally, when he missed his friend, he’d pull out the old reels, thread them through the player, and listen back, remembering their music and friendship. However, with passing years, Oscar’s music was degrading and demagnetizing, especially the cheaper reels that Charles had bought to save a bit of money.

In the early 1990s, Charles continued making music with his sons, playing a bit of bluegrass, and accompanying another older fiddler named Clint Kilgore. But something was missing. All the while, he was searching for a fiddler to whom he could entrust these treasured tapes. Someone who might be able to capture the feel of Overturf’s music and the groove they

had shared—the loping, punchy fiddle rhythm and the bouncy guitar backup tailored perfectly to it.

\* \* \* \*

*Charles Higgins's house  
Whitwell, Tennessee  
Evening of July 21, 2011*

We tinker with our tuning and chat a bit. Without much warning, Bob Townsend swoops into the droning unison A note on the fiddle's D string that starts the tune "Altamont,"<sup>10</sup> a staple of Bob, Charles, and Tim's band's—the Fiery Gizzard Stringband—repertoire.<sup>11</sup> Bob painstakingly learned the tune from Charles's recordings of Oscar, whose music serves as the core repertoire for this group and as Bob's fiddling inspiration. Tim, playing clawhammer style banjo, trickles into the descending melodic line. By the fifth beat of the tune, Charles's chunky, insistent guitar joins. I futz with my digital recorder, adjusting levels and, satisfied, pick up my fiddle and bow, trying to match the bouncy punch of Bob's bow arm as it circles clockwise and counterclockwise. We play at a stately pace, the kind that eases you into the music—a stroll around the block. Charles's guitar sets up a rhythmic foundation. He dampens his bass notes with his calloused palm, creating bursts of quickly decaying sound that incessantly mark the downbeat, often alternating between the root and the five, but sometimes just hammering away at the root. A quick but full strum over the D or A chord follows each of these bassy bursts, tagging the backbeat.

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<sup>10</sup> A setting of Altamont in the key of C was also in the repertoire of African American fiddler John Lusk, who lived off of the west side of the Cumberland Plateau and was recorded by folklorists in the 1940s. Altamont is the county seat of Grundy County, the county where Bob now lives.

<sup>11</sup> Bob tells me that the band takes its colorful name from the Fiery Gizzard, a wild, forested gorge that cuts through the plateau between his old house on South Pittsburg Mountain and the Higgins's homes near Whitwell.



After we've played the tune for almost three and half minutes and have settled into a loping groove—downbow push of Bob's fiddle aligning with Charles's bass note downbeat and propelled back up by his surging backbeat—Charles begins to slip into a new rhythm. A familiar groove emerges. What was the fairly standard *BOOM- chuck* (boom = bass note down beat, and chuck = down strummed backbeat) Old-time guitar accompaniment, morphs into *boom-chuck-a boom-chuck-a*. Charles adds the "a" by raking the pick quickly back up the strings, finding a new space after the backbeat and before the next downbeat. This extra touch creates a sense of anticipation before the downbeat. It's a whole other feel, and it feels good, like finding a missing piece of puzzle. It's what happens to Charles when Bob plays right—when he hits Oscar's lope.

A bit after we find this groove, we wrap up "Altamont." Besides being a human metronome, Tim has a refined sensitivity to pitch and wants to check the tuning of his dad's guitar. He begins working over each string, tempering them to the key of D. By all accounts, this guitar, an old Hohner dreadnought, shouldn't sound as amazing as it does; in a musical world where the thunky, bass-heavy, vintage small bodied guitars are favored, this cheaper, more recently made, broad-shouldered, deep-bodied dreadnought is delightfully unexpected. It has an incisive bass end and a biting treble. Its brighter sound makes Charles's individualistic playing stand out all the more. Content with the tuning, Tim hands it back to his father, and sets to work tuning the open back banjo his father bought for him a few years before, when he began to shift from the rolling syncopated three-finger style banjo to the bum-ditty rhythm of clawhammer style.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, Bob tests the open fifths of his fiddle, which defies most people's

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<sup>12</sup> A mighty, blue-ribbon-winning three-finger bluegrass style banjoist, Tim played three-finger style banjo on the band's first album. After the album won them the attention of the broader Old-time world, he started catching flak from less-informed Old-time musicians who insisted, based on 1970s Old-time revival tastes, that his three-finger playing was not Old-time. Tim began learning claw hammer at the insistence of his father, whose own father played a down stroke banjo style, and because of pressure from a handful of contemporary Old-time musicians (whom Tim

expectation of an Old-time fiddle: it’s a violin, crafted by a luthier in Bologna, Italy, with laser like clarity and frightening responsiveness. It matches his every motion and projects an enveloping power made more for the concert hall than for this bedroom-turned-music-room with crayon scribbles on the wall.

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### Bob Townsend

“Charles had given me those tapes of Oscar. If we were at my house, I’d play you some of those originals. The reel-to-reel tapes were in pretty bad shape. And I put them onto cassette. . . . I was worried about wearing the reel to reel out. One of them had deteriorated so bad that when I put my finger on it, the magnetic stuff just came right off and left the plastic tape. So, there was a whole three or four hours just lost. We don’t know what was on that one.”<sup>13</sup>



Figure 18 (above): Bob Townsend underneath his name on the “Bluegrass Memorial,” Dunlap, Tennessee, on 19 July 2011. (photograph by author)

refers to as “the Old-time police”). He tells a story about an early encounter with a member of “the Old-time police”—a highly respected player and teacher. The band was performing at a workshop and he was playing his Jim Grainger resonator banjo in a rolling three finger style with picks. That is to say, he was playing the way that he’s always played behind a fiddle. In his telling, the person approached him and told him he was playing bluegrass style banjo. “I said, ‘Damn it, it ain’t neither!’—in a room full of people. I said, ‘That is *not* bluegrass.’ I said, ‘I grew up listening to this.’ They’d just sit there and just pick a long, I mean they weren’t doing anything fancy, just trying to play behind Oscar and Clint. I just play straight behind the fiddle. Melody.”

For Tim, having grown up around the music matters. There is precedent for his three-finger style. “I never distinguished one from the other. I just picked,” he reflects. After sixteen years of encountering Old-time music, even as Tim has adopted a new style on an “appropriate” banjo, he fumes: “Here’s what I don’t understand. And I guess it will never be answered is: Who cares? Who cares if you’re playing three-finger behind a fiddle or claw hammer or beating on stick. They’re just trying to make music” (Higgins 2011).

<sup>13</sup> In this section, the quotations from Bob Townsend come from a conversation on July 19, 2011 (see Townsend 2010).

Bob tells me about this moment in the early 1990s, speaking loudly over the early evening pulse of crickets and tree frogs as it thickens and recedes. We're at the Dunlap Coke Ovens Memorial Park during July, 2011. Oscar's music—as magnetic particles—literally rubbed off on him. In the wake of Oscar's death, the sounded memory of his music, fixed precariously on reels of tape, clung to a fragile and deteriorating medium. To save money back in the day, Charles had purchased some lower quality tapes, and, several decades later, these tapes were not holding up well.

It's fitting that our conversation turns towards memory; we sit at a picnic bench in the park, while what locals call the "Bluegrass Memorial" stands across the lane from us with a larger than life fiberglass dreadnought guitar perched atop it.<sup>14</sup> Below, the names of local musicians are etched in granite, bearing silent witness to a sounded past. I snapped a photo of Bob standing underneath his name and underneath Oscar's name before we sat down to talk. Just beyond the monuments are the crumbling coke ovens, a testament to the mining industry that has vanished only to rematerialize as heritage. Bob tells me about how he came to embody and sound out the memory of Oscar. In Bob, Charles found someone with whom he could entrust the tapes, and someone who might be able to bring Oscar's art back into the world of the living.

Bob leads me through the story of how he came to this point. By the age of ten, he had moved from coastal Georgia through the Georgia Piedmont to South Pittsburg, Tennessee, a small, industrial city wedged between of the banks of the Tennessee River and the sandstone bluffs of the Cumberland Plateau. He reflects on the musical scene of his childhood:

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<sup>14</sup> The fact that the "Bluegrass Monument" includes musicians from a range of genres suggests the flexibility of genre as it's known in this place. Although Bob, Charles, and Tim feel the differences between Bluegrass and Old-time, there is less concern over the differences locally. Thus, Bluegrass becomes a catch-all for any sort of music played in the rural Sequatchie Valley over the last century or so.

There were a lot of musicians around at that time. Of course, it was country—this was back in the 60s. Old-time stuff: I didn't have a name for it. It was all just country. The radio station played Bill Monroe right along with Merle Haggard and whoever else. "Uncle Pen" was a theme song for some morning radio spot. I had built a little crystal radio that I was quite proud of. So, every morning "Uncle Pen" woke me up.

A neighbor boy taught him to play the guitar when he was a teenager. Another neighbor let him try out his violin. Soon after high school, he was working in the Lodge foundry (where the cast iron skillets are made), had traded his guitar for a fiddle, and started learning fiddle tunes from his wife's grandfather, Old-time fiddler Wiley Jones, who was born in Newport, Tennessee, in 1893.

The sound of the older players caught his ear early on, but living outside of the loop of the 1970s Old-time revival, Bob had to hunt the music down. On Sunday afternoons, he'd tune into local musician and emcee Peanut Faircloth's program on WDOD (the same station that hosted J.H. Gaston's old fiddlers in early 1926) in hopes of hearing him spin some of the Old-time releases from labels like Rounder and County Records. When he saved a bit of money, he'd purchase records of those older fiddlers. He'd seen PBS films about the Galax Old Fiddlers' Convention, but that scene felt too distant from his world. So Bob kept seeking out the older sounds, oblivious to the fact that there was a genre called Old-time and that it was in the midst of a revival.

Bob refined his skills and started competing in some of the local fiddle contests, but the older sound he gravitated towards didn't win ribbons. "It's funny thinking back," he tells me, recounting a conversation with his friend Willard Hamilton. "Willard said 'Bob doesn't want to play something unless it's 100 years old.' It was like it was just around the corner, I just didn't know where to look." After bumping into him at a handful of local contests in the 1970s, a

slicker, more modern contest fiddler named Wally Bryson told Bob that he “played too much like those *old timers*.” Then there was the contest in Flat Rock, Alabama:

There were four people in the contest—me and Noah Lacy and J.T. Perkins and Raeford McQuarrie were the four fiddlers. They only paid two places. I was the youngest, and J.T. was a fantastic contest fiddler. Raeford was a pretty good bluegrass fiddler. Noah was one of those *old timers*. After the contest, J.T. won and Raeford got second. Noah and I were out. He slapped me on the leg and said, ‘You’re too young and I’m too old.’ After that, I thought about what Wally said and started consciously trying to not do that.

“That” being fiddling in the older way. Around 1977, when he met Charles Higgins, Charles invited him to come visit Oscar, but having turned his attention to the bluegrass fiddling of players like Kenny Baker and Byron Berline, Bob declined, assuming that Oscar “was just another old fiddle player.” He explains, “By then, I had decided that’s not what’s happening.”

Bluegrass, however, was happening. There were plenty of gigs for a good fiddler. From his twenties into his forties, Bob played in a series of bluegrass bands, Piney Ridge and Marion County Bluegrass, performing, competing, and recording a cassette tape and LP for regional audiences. “I would make almost as much on the weekend as I would working all week, and that was when I was working in the mines.” From 1977 through 1987 Bob worked underground in the coal mines around Whitwell.<sup>15</sup> The work was hard, dangerous, and took a toll on his body. By 1989, he had left the mines and was back in a community college, training to become a physical therapist. He had also begun hanging out and playing more music with Charles. Bob played in a couple of bands with Charles and his sons Tim and Frank. Charles was keen to play fiddle tunes and helped rekindle Bob’s interest in older fiddler styles.

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<sup>15</sup> Bob’s decade in the mines included a traumatic event: on December 8, 1981, 13 miners died in Whitwell Mine #21. The disaster rocked the small community. He recalls: “I was the only man on my section that didn’t lose a brother in the explosion. . . . I was in a different mine, but we were all grouped up within a few miles of each other. We knew something had happened. We heard it. We knew something had happened. We kept right on working, but they called all the rescue squad and we knew they were gone. And they occasionally did leave for a couple of hours to do a drill, but they would come back. They didn’t come back that day. We knew something had happened.”

In the early 1990s, Bob began listening intently to some of the tapes of Oscar that Charles had lent him and tried to understand the performances he was hearing. The old tunes that had always caught his ear and fired his imagination began to take hold in a profound way, leading him onto a collision course with the Old-time scene. Bob reflects on his motivation to dig in:

I just started realizing that Oscar—even though it was at that point still fairly muffled—I just started realizing what was there. That that music was something that people—some people—would be interested in. It made me think about “why did you even pick the fiddle up?” It was to make some effort at preserving. Although I couldn’t preserve the exact music that Wiley Jones had played, I could preserve something in that style.

Even though he and Charles were playing in bluegrass bands together, they’d incorporate Oscar’s pieces into sets. “Me and Charles would, just the two of us, get together. We didn’t play bluegrass. We worked on Oscar’s tunes mostly,” he recounts. A few years later, he found the places where the old tunes were being played and began attending Old-time events and workshops. He had an epiphany about the genres of bluegrass and Old-time. “They’re like train tracks,” he tells me, describing the difference between bluegrass and Old-time. “They’re running right beside each other, but you can’t just talk from one to the other anywhere.” This new material captured Bob’s ear and imagination, sending him down a path that has shaped his musical practice for the last twenty years. And Oscar’s music became the focal point.

\* \* \* \*

*Charles Higgins’s house  
Whitwell, Tennessee  
Evening of July 21, 2011*

We’ve wrapped up Oscar’s version of “Altamont” and are fine tuning our instruments. Like us, instruments are settling into the session.

“Bob, I worked that shuffle out that Bryson used to put on his bow,” Charles announces over the sound of our tuning, referring to his cousin Bryson with whom he spent time as a young

man working in Indiana. “I worked that shuffle out that Bryson used to put on his fiddle. Now, I can’t go back to it to save my life. I’ll run across it again.” Charles points to my little digital recorder, musing that it would be handy for recalling the bowing lick. He recalls some of the bowing motions that his cousin Bryson Higgins made before he died in 1998, “You’re pulling. It took three little short licks, and then you’re pulling a long lick on it.”

Charles’s description cues Bob up. Bob, who knew and learned from Bryson (and once tricked Charles’s wife into thinking his playing was Bryson’s), hits the syncopated lick and begins to play Bryson’s version of “The Eighth of January,” using the bowing lick to signal the end of phrases.<sup>16</sup> We whirl the tune around for three or four minutes. I struggle to remember the way that Bryson Higgins’s version of this widespread tune goes. Besides the struggle to grab the melody, I am again struggling to bring my bow arm into alignment with the smooth yet punchy push and pull of Bob’s bow. I’m applying a different, lighter pressure on the bow stick with the fingers on my right hand and drawing the bow at slightly slower speed. It’s challenging to shift from my springy, bouncier bowing to a more direct bowing in which the bow hair never leaves the strings. We wrap the tune up before I go completely off the tracks.

“I don’t believe I’ll ever forget that night that me and Bryson played that up there in Indiana,” Charles muses.

Tim chuckles. He’s heard this one countless times. “I know what you’re fixing to say before you say it.”

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<sup>16</sup> In an interview once, Bob told me the story: “Now when Bryson was alive, of course, I was hanging out and watching every move Bryson was making. And I could pretty well sound a lot like Bryson. I mean in fact, I was up there at Charles’s one time, and Louise was gone, and she came back in at some point and we were just playing and she walked in there and said, ‘I thought that was Bryson in here.’ So, I felt pretty good about, you know, fooling her. But, since he died, I know I can play his tunes and I don’t sound like what I did. I know it’s changed” (Townsend 2011).

Charles tells it anyway, managing to thread the story together through his own chuckles: “We got to playing, and that poor old boy, he was just everywhere on the guitar. He jerked that cap off, and he said, ‘Hot damn, George,’ he said, ‘I knowed we’d finally get it.’” We laugh as Charles imitates the frustrated guitar player, grabbing his hat by the bill and throwing it onto the ground. “Me and Bryson liked to cracked up. Yeah, we’d liked to crack up. He was four chords behind.” The flummoxed guitar player had failed to grasp the twists of Bryson’s “Eighth of January.” We get over the laugh.

“Tim, play mine there,” Charles asks his son. Tim plays “Johnson Boys.”

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## **Part II: Process (or a Biography of a Groove)**

### **Unfixing and Emulating Oscar**

Bob Townsend’s project of learning to embody Oscar’s music, especially incorporating the bowing patterns, rhythms, and pressures into his body, presented profound challenges. First, there were the fragile, degrading consumer grade reels of tape. Then there was the need to create listening copies. Then there were the challenges of translating the muffled sounds into musical motion. Thus began Bob’s effort to embody Oscar’s sound. In his effort to recover Overturf’s sound, he relied on old and new sound technologies, his ability to hear and mimic sounds, and, crucially, Charles’s memory of Oscar’s performance. Charles’s field recordings became the raw material from which Bob imagined and extrapolated his Old-time style.

As one older sound technology gave out in the late 1980s, it necessitated the use of a brand new, more robust technology in the 1990s. In order to learn the music, Bob produced cassette tape listening copies of the reel-to-reel tapes Charles had given him. Still, the limits of analog technologies and the acuity of his ear limited his early understanding of Oscar’s music.



“It was kind of a slow go because the cassettes were so bad,” he explains. “I couldn’t tell much about what was going on bowing-wise because it was muffled. You could hear the notes but that was kind of it.”<sup>17</sup> Bowing, as most older fiddlers have told me, is the heart of the music. It allows for players to express their creativity—to leave musical fingerprints. It drives tunes along. As such, it often becomes the focus of instructional workshops. As Old-time fiddlers develop their ear, they come to a point where they can hear and feel changes in bow direction in a recording. Good, historically informed bowing marks expert performances. It is also, in the absence of visual confirmation, subject to imagination and interpretation. Bowing is an interpretive act in which sounds and rhythms are re-created through motion.

That said, a muffled recording in which the melody is decipherable but the bowing is obscured, presents the aspiring learner with a crucial gap in sonic information. Grappling with lo-fidelity and missing information, Bob pored over the recordings. Through intense listening and his own experience with the instrument, he imagined Oscar’s bowing motions and fleshed out a skeletal version of Oscar’s performances. The next step in his process drew on Charles’s memory of Oscar’s musicking body (Rahaim 2012, Small 1998):

So I’d do what I thought was right, and then go to Charles and he’d say: “Well, that’s almost it.” And he didn’t know enough to break it down and say “do this here and do this here.” So, I’d go home and practice it a different way—come back. “Well that’s closer, but you need to do something right here.” He wouldn’t know what, but he’d tell me “This part right here’s not right.” So, I’d go back home and try something else.

Through the 90s, Bob worked between the cassette transfers of deteriorated reels and Charles’s memory of Oscar to piece together Oscar’s music and style. Ears and imaginations can only go so far when they encounter degraded recordings; the whole project relied on Bob’s relationship

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<sup>17</sup> In this section, the quotations from Bob come from an interview from 2011 (see Townsend 2011).

with Charles and Charles's relationship with Oscar. Besides cultivating Oscar's style, the face-to-face learning cultivated the relationship between Bob and Charles.

“Then, eventually, I bought a little piece of equipment that filtered off those reel to reels and made a big difference to where you could hear much clearer,” Bob explains, describing a digital technology empowered breakthrough around 2000. These new technologies enabled him to attenuate the noise and access a key slice of sonic information on the recordings. A new kind of listening, empowered by digital technology, allowed Bob to align his own playing closer to Oscar's.<sup>18</sup> He explains the alignment by using the word *emulate*: “I can't claim that I play exactly like Oscar. In Charles's words, I do a pretty good job emulating him.” I ask what “emulate” means: “To me, ‘emulate’ means not an exact imitation, but at least getting the feel. So anyway, that's—I guess really, in a way, that's all any of us can do, as far as trying to be an exact copy of another musician—it just doesn't happen very often.”

For Bob, emulation connotes a particular mimetic project that involves one musician “getting the feel” for another musician, cultivating bodily knowledge and skill. It relies on a refined aural imagination that requires musicians to use their body to reproduce sounds with particular mechanics and motions that they imagine earlier players used. Within the various contemporary Old-time scenes around the world, expert Old-time players achieve an intimate knowledge of past performances and past performers through a deep engagement with recorded performances. It is a listening that is bodily—the listener understands the sound as patterns of motion. It is also a kind of listening-as-process that plays out over time: players revisit older

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<sup>18</sup> I should note that these sorts of software typically make certain sounds audible by silencing, removing, or manipulating other frequencies. In this paradoxical way, they achieve a seemingly higher fidelity recording by creating something that is, in fact, lower fidelity because it has had certain parts of its thingness manipulated, compressed, removed, or muted. The sonic object is altered. Although this sort of alteration might pose an interesting theoretical problem for some, Bob found the alteration to be immensely helpful in his musical practice.

recordings over weeks, months, and years, adjusting their performances over time to more accurately capture the feel, techniques, and performances they hear on older recordings. Tunes are their units of work. Among contemporary expert players, there is a sense that no rendition in the present is final. There is always the possibility for improvement or a more faithful rendering. In this way, the past exerts a profound power over present performances.

Obtained through imaginative, careful, and digitally enhanced listening, Bob's getting a feel for Oscar's music relied on replicating a particular set of motions—an arm movement and a corresponding pattern of bow movement. The musician's ability to listen for and imagine another musician's body is central to the project. Expert players who care deeply about past performances often attempt to replicate both the right and left hand techniques they hear on older recordings. For Bob, this involves a grammar of bow motions that underlies and gives sense to recordings of Oscar's music. However, Bob's case differs from many such projects in a critical way: Bob relies not only on his (technologically aided) ears, but also on Charles's memory of Oscar's motions. Nevertheless, similar processes involving repeated listening, trial and error, and imagination shape the efforts of musicians who rely solely on recorded sound to guide them.

### **Embodying Oscar: A Fiddle Lesson with Bob**

*Bob Townsend's House  
Coalmont, Tennessee  
October 9, 2008*

It's three years before the summer jam session at Charles's house, and Bob and I sit knee to knee in his music room in the back of his house. Even though I've played with him for almost a decade, I've never asked him to teach me a tune until today. Having never really taken formal fiddle lessons, I'm trying hard to keep my mind focused and to replicate the motions that I'm seeing and hearing. We both have our fiddles in hand. The computer, with all the digitally

doctored recordings of Oscar, sits in a corner of the room. Bob walks me through Oscar's slippery setting of "Bucking Mule." He plays the first low phrase—4 bars, what Old-time players call the "A part"—of the tune. It's all about small bow-hand circles.

"So, you're going clockwise and then you're going counterclockwise," he tells me.<sup>19</sup> Sensing my confusion about the clocklike motions he has described, he demonstrates and makes a series of small, tea-saucer-sized circles with his right-hand, winding clockwise and then unwinding counterclockwise. I focus my attention on the image and sound of the bow as it seesaws across the fulcrum of the D and A strings. The sonic effect of the winding and unwinding of the clock is a rhythmic punchiness. This bowing creates a density of drones—the full-throated, bassy resonance of an open G against the stopped G note on the D string—and a rhythmic, katydid-like elasticity as the piece winds, unwinds, and winds back around four notes. It feels like a rhythmic palindrome. It's characteristic of Bob's sound, and, from what I know of Oscar's playing, characteristic of his sound as well.

Sensing that I'm not fully following, Bob distills the bowing of the phrase, "To me, you've got to worry more about circles." He plays the first four beats of the tune again. "You're starting off going—clockwise—if you're looking at your hand from that perspective, you're going clockwise. But then you reverse it." Bob plays the low A part again, and his hand traces graceful tight circles (the circumference of a coffee mug), with the fluidity and insistence with which I imagine John Hancock signed his name. I try clumsily to replicate the motion, and achieve neither the sound nor the rhythm. Handling the bow, which usually feels as comfortable as writing with a pencil, now feels foreign. I become tangled up in the pattern, unwinding my winding and winding my unwinding. What should be tight, accented revolutions are unruly,

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<sup>19</sup> The quotations in this section come from a recording of a lesson I had with Bob Townsend (see Townsend 2008).

arrhythmic orbs. This is a kind of motion that some players call a “bow rock.” I’ve made rocking motions with the bow before, like the funky, syncopated, surging figure eights of Tommy Jarrell’s signature motion, but these prim circles elude my bow arm. As I come to recognize that it will take me several weeks of practice to really get this thing right, Bob kindly maps it out: “If you divided it up into four sections, it’s going to go clockwise, counterclockwise, counterclockwise, clockwise.” He conceptualizes much of Oscar’s bowing as winding and unwinding a clock: it provides a framework for translating Oscar’s recorded performances into his own embodied renderings of Oscar’s music.

“I don’t know how you think in bowing patterns, but a lot of mine, and what I’ve found works to figure out what Oscar was doing, is: you’re making circles with your hand, with your right hand, so that’s how I think in terms of, when I’m playing Oscar tunes. Now, other stuff—it doesn’t work—but Oscar’s seems too.” He laughs, presumably recognizing the infinite ways that people approach bowing, and concludes, “So you’re going clockwise and then you’re going counter clockwise.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Such analogies are common as contemporary fiddlers attempt to map bowing. Alabama master fiddler James Bryan’s father described bowing in full moons and half-moons—a description which James uses in workshops. The late Tommy Jarrell’s famous syncopated bow rocks are often described as figure eights. The Tommy Jarrell bow lights video, in which a light was attached to his wrist and then filmed in a dark room, is a cult classic among hard core old time musicians—with or without the aid of mind altering substances, many players have attempted to find patterns as the light traces through the darkness. Among contemporary Old-time fiddlers, the abstract motions of bowing are often translated into images or poetic mnemonic phrases that helpfully conceptualize motions and create a shorthand for describing complex bowing patterns and motions. In fact, expert fiddler Brad Leftwich has developed teaching videos and books that link particular patterns to master players (i.e. the syncopated Tommy Jarrell lick, the “Melvin” lick, named after the archaic West Virginia fiddler Melvin Wine, and the “Benton” lick, named for the bluesy, more modern sounding North Carolina fiddler Benton Flippen).

Outside the realm of formal instruction, workshops, and teaching materials, players on-the-ground conceptualize and communicate bowing patterns through descriptive phrases. Complex motions and technique are rendered legible through language. These motions also speak to genealogies of learning, as they typically attach to prior players. For example, octogenarian East Tennessee fiddler Charlie McCarroll, who grew up playing with his grandmother, father, and uncle in Roane County and has performed most of his music out of earshot of contemporary Old-time music worlds, creates labels for certain bowing motions. He tells me that tunes in the key of D are often enhanced by “riding the bass,” which he defines as drawing long droning down bows in which both the G and D strings are sounded simultaneously; McCarroll holds the D unison note on the G string with his pinky while also sounding notes on the D string. He identifies this technique as a crucial component of his father Jimmy McCarroll’s

### **“Oscarizing” Bob (or “Bobizing” Oscar)**

The tensions generated by the claims of the past on present creativity place expert Old-time fiddlers into tension; they constantly negotiate between their own artistic vision and the tradition as they understand it. From the outside, it is tempting to think that a musical project built around emulation of master musicians (now mostly encountered on recordings) would be stifling. However, this tension between personal pleasure and expressivity and a sense of responsibility to historic styles animate expert players' engagement with the music. Like Bob, many expert players believe that regardless of how closely they may have studied their sources, their own musical personalities and body mechanics will impact even their most careful and historically attentive renditions of the music.

Bob, who until recently made his living as physical therapist, is keenly aware of the ways that bodies impact motions, and, in this case, the ways that a player's body shapes performances and sounds. He recognizes differences between his motions and Overturf's which are, at the most essential level, physical differences between bodies:

Now, according to Charles, I probably still don't have Oscar's arm movement. Of course, Oscar was a foot taller than I am . . . but Charles always described that he would make a big movement, bringing his elbow in. There are some things—no matter which notes you choose or which bowing you choose—just your personality or your body mechanics or the way you hold the fiddle makes it sound a certain way or whatever, you know. Some of that you just can't get away from just being yourself. And every fiddler is different. (Townsend 2011)

The differences in body mechanics create differences in sound. Efforts to master the music in

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performances, documented on Columbia recordings of his masterpiece “Hometown Blues.” He slips the lick into a number of other tunes he plays in the key of D. During my visits with Charlie's older brother Tom, who passed away in 2015, I watched him use the same technique in his renditions of a handful of tunes in the key of D. Particular bowing patterns can become the calling card of fiddlers, and, in the contemporary world of Old-time music instruction, a kind of instructional shorthand.

such fine-grained detail lead other expert, contemporary fiddlers to similar recognitions.<sup>21</sup>

Bob strives to capture some essential quality that he hears in the recordings of Oscar, while simultaneously recognizing that his body will shape his sounds,

Anatomical differences. You're going to sound different than somebody else even if you try your hardest to capture what that person is doing. . . . I think any student is going to try to emulate their teacher, or imitate, whichever word you want to use. At some point, that connection is going to be cut. And you're going to develop into your—even though I try to sound like Oscar, and a lot of places I feel like I get his bowing and his notes, but I'm still not Oscar. His fiddling had some essence that I still feel like I've never captured. (Townsend 2011)

Though they may strive to replicate recorded sounds, Old-time fiddlers cannot help but ultimately sound like themselves.

Nevertheless, this quest to capture the essence of another fiddler motivates, eludes, and challenges learners over long term listening/learning projects. Bob describes the tension between his artistry and Oscar's: "I'm creating my style. At some point in this, I may still learn, listen, and pick up a new lick that he's done here or there. At some point, I gave up on ever getting everything that he did. I've got to do what I do and not drive myself over the edge trying to get the last little nuance of, which would be stifling and not creative." Carving out space for his own creativity within the narrower practice of Overturf's music, Bob admits the impossibility of becoming a sonic carbon copy; he navigates the ambiguous zone between the pleasures of playing and listening with the need to nail every detail. Even as Bob represents one end of the spectrum of expert old-time, exerting an extraordinary amount of labor to align his music with the past, he still finds immense pleasure in his music making.

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<sup>21</sup> Asheville fiddler John Engle has dedicated years to replicating the performances he hears on recordings and sees on films of Surry County, North Carolina, fiddler master Tommy Jarrell. Engle has made a thorough analysis of Jarrell's performances. His project of replicating Jarrell's motion and achieving his sound led him to deep frustration. His friend and bandmate Meredith McIntosh, an instructor in the movement-focused Alexander Technique, helped him understand that his body could never move exactly as Jarrell's did.

As Bob's style emerges from his study of Overturf's playing, Charles and Tim can't help but hear the imprint of Oscar's music in his playing: Tim has come up with a name for the phenomenon and tells Bob that he's "Oscarizing" pieces. Bob recognizes the shift too:

I play other tunes that are not Oscar's, which there for a while we would, if the bluegrass band learned a new tune and I learned it on the fiddle, I'd use—you know how you do learning a tune, you learn kind of the skeleton of it and get going. It wouldn't take long, Tim would say "Well, you've *Oscarized* that one!" That's what he would call it. I wasn't really *Oscarizing* it. I was maybe using what I had learned trying to emulate Oscar, and I'd really *Bobized* it or whatever, rather than *Oscarizing*. (Townsend 2011)

This joke about *Oscarizing* reveals how thoroughly he has internalized or embodied Overturf's performances—how thoroughly he has come to incorporate the motions of Oscar's music into his own. Oscar permeates his music making, creating something new from something old. By *Bobizing* a tune, he acknowledges the balance between his own musical self and the other that he emulates. Bob mediates between the past and the present and finds a path to satisfaction and pleasure, providing Charles with a familiar yet new experience.

As Bob gives presence to a historical player and new interpretations of local sounds through decades of assiduous listening and mimetic effort, he listens to Oscar's music in new ways, balancing the pleasures of listening with his growing ability to analyze and comprehend the intricacies of Oscar's recorded performances. Once a source of comfort and relaxation, he tells me that Oscar's tunes have become objects of study that invite perpetual analysis and reinterpretation: "There used to be comfort, relaxation—I guess you would say. But since I have tried to pick it apart so much, now I can't listen to it without trying to still pick it apart" (Townsend 2011). Both of us start laughing, recognizing how maddening this kind of listening



can be—the way that old recordings and performances can exhaust and elude the would-be learner or the player who thought they had a tune nailed down.<sup>22</sup>

“I have trouble just listening to it for pure enjoyment like I used to,” he admits:

I almost wish I could go back. Well, I *do* wish. It’s not almost—I wish I could listen to it for what it is and not try to pull it apart. And you know, even now, some of them I feel like I’ve got down—the tunes—down pretty good. Of course, most of them there are numerous recordings at least three or four of that particular tune, and, you know, I’ll listen to one or the other versions that he did, and he’ll do something a little different, and I’ll think “what did he do there?” (Townsend 2011)<sup>23</sup>

### “Getting that groove going” or Mediating Oscar

Not only does Bob’s description of his changing experiences as a listener suggest the ways expert Old-time musicians experience a different kind of listening in which pleasure and efforts to analyze compete, but it also suggests the nature of a fiddle tune as they enter into a musician’s repertoire. Tunes are not merely sequences of notes subject to a particular rhythmic framework. They are sites where artistic interpretation and creativity play out. Tunes are fluid things that can be honed to reflect the source recording or allowed to reconfigure around an individual player’s musical sensibility. Because of the fixed nature of source recordings, players make choices as to how they relate to and render these recordings. These choices can be shaped by relationships to other living musicians.

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<sup>22</sup> Expert Old-time musicians live with recorded performances, returning to listen again and again over time. As the recorded performances become more familiar, players adjust their own renditions to capture increasing levels of nuance. Such listening can be exhausting.

<sup>23</sup> The tension between listening for pleasure and listening as learner becomes a defining characteristic of the way expert Old-time players consume older recordings. In August of 2012, when I started teaching Old-time music at East Tennessee State University, my colleague Roy Andrade and I were sitting in his office chatting about the program. He told me that he rarely listens to Old-time music outside of work because it feels like work—like something to be analyzed. This is understandable since much of his day-to-day work as director of the Old-time music program at the university involves musical instruction built around the careful analysis of old recordings. To be sure, there is a kind of pleasure that players take in listening to and understanding the techniques behind masterful performances. However, the fact remains that expert players develop complex relationships in which old recordings can torment or reward them. Acts of listening, then, can take on multiple meanings and can generate a range of affective experiences.

In Bob's case, a sense of responsibility, forged out of his relationship to Charles, shapes his engagement with and interpretation of Oscar's music, leading him to want to get the music right. His relationship with Charles is at the core, but it also extends outward to include the dozen or so folks who would show up at the monthly jam sessions he hosted at the South Pittsburg Volunteer fire hall. It extends to the students to whom he taught Oscar's bowing techniques and versions of tunes in his community and further afield at summer music camps and festivals around the country. Because Charles has entrusted him with these prized recordings and because he has come to think of himself as both "Charles's fiddler" and a dear friend, Bob strives to play Oscar's music right—to play it in a way that Charles will recognize. To play it in a way that grooves musically and relationally. The social bond is shaped and is strengthened by the music making. Hence the excruciating effort and the painstaking listening that Bob invests in the music.

When Bob emulates Oscar and hits the musical groove, Charles shifts his guitar accompaniment from a basic accompaniment to a more rhythmically dense picking pattern that Bob calls his "double shuffle lick." This happened when we played "Altamont" during the summer jam session. The music comes into focus and feels tighter, and Bob lets us hear that he is "Charles's fiddler." Bob describes the experience of finding Oscar's groove: "You know when you're—when I can get Charles doing that double shuffle lick that he does with the pick, I know it's right then. And I just try to keep the groove going." As Bob's playing aligns with Oscar's recorded performances, something magic happens: he invites Charles into the groove. He continues: "I think that's what sets Charles off. It's not hitting a note, it's getting that groove going." Bob tells me about a video that someone made of him and Charles in the groove at a contest. You could see his Oscar-inspired bow arm, winding and unwinding the clock. If you

looked closely, you could also see Charles making miniature circles with his pick, replicating Bob's motion. The groove is about Bob and Charles locking in around a certain rhythm, which is, ultimately, about a feeling of connectedness that extends beyond music.

I ask Bob if moments like that are the closest moments of emulation and he answers: "Oh yeah, definitely. If I go back and learn a new lick that Oscar's done somewhere and throw it in, Charles knows: He'll know it immediately. He'll give me a look or something—I know it's right." Charles musical body becomes a gauge of Bob's project of emulation. As he sparks memory and recognition in Charles, Bob feels pleasure in the sense of doing the thing right and in the deeper relationship that it fosters between Charles and him.

Bob cuts to the heart of the matter: "I'm Charles's fiddle player. To me the whole, I mean, I appear to be the front man, but I mean, it's really Charles's music more than it is mine." "Well," he continues, pausing to weigh his words and the weightiness of his musical friendship with Charles: "I mean, he's been wanting to have somebody play that music ever since he played with Oscar, and Oscar got in such bad shape he couldn't play. And then finally passed away. But Charles has been wanting somebody to play that music with him ever since."

"So you're that?" I ask.

"I'm that fiddler," he concludes.

**"He emulated him awful close . . ."**

*A jam in 2017  
Charles Higgins's house  
Whitwell, Tennessee  
Evening of March 13, 2017*

"I was really trying to document it, when I was doing it, I was trying to document it," Charles tells Bob and me about his field recording of Oscar from the 1970s and '80s. It's a startlingly cold March evening in 2017. We sit in his music room, satisfied after a few hours of

tunes. All evening, snowflakes and sleet have been pelting the windows, softly like a brush circling around a snare drum. Tim left fifteen minutes ago, preparing for his early morning commute to the boilermaker shop in Chattanooga. We've played through a good chunk of Oscar's repertoire in the key of A. Bob's pulled out some of Oscar's tunes that I've never heard. Throughout the evening, Charles has been hitting his "double-shuffle" groove—signaling approval that Bob is indeed getting the feel of Oscar's music. I've done my best to sync up with the feel. Charles has started to reflect on his reason for making all those field recordings. I scramble to turn my recorder back on. He has just told me that he thought the music was dying.

I prompt him to pick up the thread, "So you thought it was dying?"

"Yeah, I really did. And his style, I guess, has all died out. Because them old timers played different than what people play today."

"Does Bob get it pretty well?"

"It's awful close. He may have pulled the bow a little bit different than Bob does. But it's still got the timing and swing to it that Oscar had."

"Is that what gets you in your rhythm?"

"Yes. Ain't nobody plays rhythm like I do!" We all start laughing, recognizing that Charles's guitar style is unquestionably his own and resists explanation.

I ask him if playing with Bob feels like playing with Oscar. He answers, "Yeah. They're note for note. Like I said, Oscar may have pulled a little bit of different bow on a place or two, but it's still coming out the same, whatever Bob's doing to it. It's pretty well the same thing that Oscar was playing." Charles collects his thoughts for a second and looks across the room at Bob before he concludes, "He emulated him awful close, I'll tell you."

## **Winding Down**

What unfolds is a story about bringing fixed sounds back into the world of face-to-face music making. As a story of local traditions sustained and mediated, it is a counterpoint to stories of Old-time revival and outsider actors. As a story about an understudied area, it gives a glimpse of the richness of local music making. At the most basic level, Bob brings the sounds of Oscar's from deteriorating tapes back into the fiddle. And, in entering back into the world of the living, these sounds enter back into relationships, creating an intimate communion that plays out through music. As Bob learns to play like Oscar, his relationship with Charles grows. When he encounters the limits of the recordings, he returns to his face-to-face relationship with Charles. It is a story of emulation in which fixed objects on a recording—things that shouldn't be fixed on tape and that weren't fixed in their original lifetime—are brought, through the excruciatingly intense work of learning and listening, back into the body and into social relationships. It is a story of mediation—of sounds transmitted through Oscar's body onto the magnetic reel, onto cassette, through a digital filter and the filter of Charles's memory, and into Bob's body. By recovering the memory of Oscar from the lo-fidelity realm of recording and both embodying and personalizing his sounds, Bob finds his musical voice, and, in the process, brings sound into the hi-fi realm of face-to-face music making and cultivates a deeper relationship with Charles.

Intimacy, the ability to read each other's bodies, marks the story and the sociality of the jam sessions. The bodily practice of music making renders a deep friendship audible. It is, for Charles, a way of reckoning with the personal loss of a friend and an effort to keep a memory alive. With Bob, Charles can, in a sense, recover the past. He can feel the groove that he had with Oscar. His musical body and muscle memory can find their way back into the motions that defined his visits with Oscar. Bob, in turn, mediates the spirit of Oscar's music through his performance. Different fiddlers create different grooves. The groove that Bob creates is a local

groove, learned from Charles's field recordings. His bow is punchier than most. The whole ensemble punches and counterpunches in a distinctive way. Some fiddlers create a waterfall of notes, each bit of melody slipping into the next. Others create stately, well-enunciated phrases. Still others create phrases from a syncopated bouncing bow, where melodies are determined by the rhythmic return of the bow to the strings. Bob does something different, something uniquely Bob, and, simultaneously, uniquely Oscar.

When Bob gets Oscar's groove, his bow hand traces circles: he winds and unwinds the clock. Processes of winding and unwinding shape this story that is about embodying old sounds, finding intimacy, and unmuffling techniques and repertoire. This process begins with Oscar's musicking body, winds onto Charles's reel-to-reels in the 1970s and 1980s, and unwinds back into Bob's body (with the help of new digital technologies) in the 1990s. Over time, with each unwinding of the tape on the player, magnetic material flakes off and the sound degrades further and further. Like the motion of the reels, time itself winds and unwinds as Bob and Charles work to bring Oscar's old sounds and groove into the present and as Tim plays music from their childhood that he didn't even realize he knew. Likewise, social relations are subject to this process of winding and unwinding; relationships dissipate through loss and intensify through intimate listening and careful musical learning and performance on the southern end of Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau. In the process of bringing Oscar's music into the present, Charles, Bob, and Tim are bound together by a sense of responsibility to each other, Oscar, and the place they call home.

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*Figure 19 (below): Charles Higgins holds Oscar Overturf's fiddle, Whitwell, Tennessee, 13 March 2017. (photography by author)*



*Figure 20 (below): Charles and his Hohner guitar at the Great Southern Fiddlers Convention in Chattanooga, Tennessee, 11 March 2016 (photograph by author)*



**CHAPTER 5**  
**“BAD NOTES” AS GOOD INTONATION: CULTIVATING A CONNOISSEURSHIP OF  
OFFNESS AS ON-NESS**

**Introducing the Bad Note**

*Shay Garriock’s Violin Shop*  
*Pittsboro, North Carolina*  
*October 23, 2014*

“There’s some bad notes in it,” Shay Garriock warns me sheepishly and laughs, before he starts to fiddle his rendition of the standard Old-time tune “Forked Deer,” which he tells me is the culmination of thirty years of playing it. Shay, who is near 50, started to learn fiddle when he left suburban Richmond to attend college in southwest Virginia in the 1980s, when there were a handful of older master players still in the region. He befriended some of them, learning what he could. Since then, he’s won blue ribbons at the prestigious Appalachian String Band Festival in Clifftop, West Virginia, and at the small local conventions where zip codes play as much a role as the actual performance in determining who wins. Recognition in these very different musical worlds suggests that there is something compelling about his fiddling.

We’re sitting in Shay’s violin-making workshop. Large windows let in sharp October morning light and rattle as trucks roll into downtown Pittsboro, North Carolina. Tools line the work bench behind him—a belt sander and a drill press. A mold for a violin hangs next to a framed black and white photograph of his musical mentor Hick Edmunds, who lived to 94 in southwest Virginia.

“What do you mean bad notes?” I ask him about the piece he’s preparing to play.

“Bad notes. It’s imperfect. That’s all I’ll say.”



“In a way that you like, though?” I offer.

“I guess so.”

I try again, “Imperfectly bad notes?”

“Yeah. But not done intentionally—I think they’re done by accident. It’s just something I technically haven’t learned to do.”

“Bad notes” are ambiguous in terms of pitch and intonation, intentionality and taste, and meaning.<sup>1</sup> In spite of this ambiguity, they matter to expert players and listeners in the contemporary Old-time scene.<sup>2</sup> Shay plays his rendition of “Forked Deer.” It modulates, meaning it switches keys, spending half of its time in the key of D and the other half in the key of A. In the half of the tune in the key of A, Shay’s third interval falls a bit flat, landing in a murky pitch space between a C and C#. If we were sitting at a piano, it would exist in some no-man’s land in the cracks between keys. The keys on an equally tempered piano cannot play one of these microtonal “bad notes.”

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## Introduction

In the absence of face-to-face relationships with old master players, the ability to translate old commercial and field recordings into powerful, moving performances is a key pathway to mastery in the contemporary world of Old-time music making. In this chapter, I examine how something seemingly small—a *bad* note—comes to be heard, felt, and understood as a sign of

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<sup>1</sup> In his study of Kentucky Old-time fiddle music, ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon observes that “some players, particularly those who developed solo fiddle styles, played certain notes a little flat or sharp, deliberately and consistently, to get an edge or resonance to their playing” (2001: 31). In a *Strings* magazine article, professional fiddler Suzy Thompson fiddlers who learned to play prior to World War I (2004: 44-49).

<sup>2</sup> In using the term “expert,” I refer to players who have received recognition as teachers and performers. This recognition is visible in their invitations to teach at instructional camps and festivals, as well as awards won at fiddler’s conventions.

assiduous listening, careful learning, and good taste among some expert musicians and listeners.<sup>3</sup> Hearing bad notes as good intonation is one subtle way that expert musicians and listening connoisseurs cultivate an aesthetic of funkiness through learning, listening, and performance (e.g., microtonal dissonance, dissonant and unresolved chordal accompaniment, scratchy or gritty bowing—what I am calling “offness”).<sup>4</sup> Players come to feel the dissonances of offness as on-ness. When on-ness is felt through offness, it’s a sensorial experience that can invoke the senses of smell (the “who farted chord”) and taste (“like eating jalapenos” or “like putting ketchup on a taco”), suggesting that hearing is about much more than just the ear. By attending to the ways these subtle signs of mastery are learned and embodied, this chapter expands my focus on the intimate relationships that contemporary players form with old recordings and older musicians and the sound technologies that enable this auditory intimacy.

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter emerged from a series of filmed interviews I conducted with nine expert Old-time fiddlers around the Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill area in the fall of 2014. Unlike the Chattanooga area, where much of my research was based, the Triangle played a critical role in the Old-time revival and has long been a place where Old-time repertoires and performance styles blended and coexisted alongside more local styles (Carter 1991, Hicks 1995a, Newberry 1989). To this day, it is recognized as one of the most vibrant Old-time communities in the nation. I started this smaller project simply hoping to capture a snapshot of who was around and what they were up to musically. Besides discussing their musical background and practice, I asked each player to pick three meaningful tunes to share for my project. Funky, dissonant tunes kept popping up. Alice Gerrard, David Bass, Kenny Jackson, Shay Garriock, and Wayne Martin all chose to play pieces that involved some kind of dissonance achieved through subtle shifts in intonation. They’d point out that the respective tune had a special feel—often described as a sense of oldness. This research led me to consider what these kinds of sounds mean to players and listeners.

<sup>4</sup> Although it’s beyond the scope of this chapter, players can embrace offness through a range of choices related to instrument, type of strings, and setup. Choosing brighter steel core violin strings over warmer synthetic core strings is a way to consciously avoid the sound of more classically influenced performers. Synthetic strings are more commonly used in classical performance. In that world, cheaper, more durable steel strings are often used as student strings. As for the bow, choices about rosin (how much and what kind), bow hair (finer white hair or coarser black hair), and bow hair tension can accentuate or suppress a player’s grittiness. Beyond the material properties of the bow, Old-time players employ a range of bow-holds. In the realm of instrument setup, the actual shape and thickness of the violin’s bridge—the small piece of maple that conducts vibrations from the strings to the instrument—can impact how funky a fiddle sounds: flatter bridges allow players to create drones, moving more easily from one pair of strings to another, while more arched bridges, as preferred by classical violinists, allow players to have greater control over individual strings. These sorts of choices extend beyond the fiddle. Players of other instruments select instruments (an old boxy sounding guitar or a new jangly sounding guitar) to accentuate offness. Among guitar players and banjo players, one of the most notable examples of offness is the avoidance of brighter new strings that jangle and the preference for “dead” old strings with thunky, rapidly decaying notes that wobble around a pitch center.

I argue that proper performances of bad notes (and related forms of offness) allow contemporary Old-time musicians to position themselves as tasteful, knowledgeable experts of “old” music in a scene in which broad circulation and recent institutionalization have scrambled the calculus of authenticity (i.e., older masters who represented localized traditions) that has defined it since the 1970s revival. Performances of bad notes index old recordings, reveal a player’s familiarity with the canon of old recordings, and allow expert players to demonstrate their mastery of that canon and the performance techniques represented therein to fellow listener/player/connoisseurs. Significantly, offness is often rooted in a musician’s concern for oldness—in a quest to emulate old sounds and older performance styles, especially expressive intonation. For contemporary practitioners, the presence and origins of bad notes are ambiguous: some contemporary players speculate that they recall older intonational aesthetics heard in Western musical traditions, while others wonder whether African and Native American approaches to making music might have influenced intonation and pitch in Old-time. Whatever the case may be, contemporary connoisseurs identify bad notes as an old sound and a defining feature of an older aesthetic.

Performances of these dissonances, perceived to be a key aesthetic feature of older generations of players, push against more dominant, equally-tempered regimes of pitch and less-informed, leveled approaches to making Old-time music. In Old-time, performances of offness have social and political meanings, especially as their funkiness offer a sonic critique of the perceived values of conservatory-trained roots musicians and the perceived “festivalization” of the music—things that some experts fear are negatively impacting the music. Performances of bad notes and offness allow musicians to position themselves as a particular kind of expert in the

world of Old-time, while indexing a sonic and social past that delivers a critique of perceived changes in the genre.

My concept of offness and discussion of bad notes draws on Charles Keil's notion of "participatory discrepancies" —the idea that music needs flaws and imperfections to groove—and describes ways that some Old-time practitioners position themselves "out of time" and "out of tune" with more audible and equally tempered worlds of music in the U.S. "It is the little discrepancies between hands and feet within a jazz drummer's beat, between bass and drum, between rhythm section and soloist, that create the groove and invite us to participate," Keil writes of participatory discrepancies (1994: 98). In particular, he describes "textural or timbral participatory discrepancies" and "pitch discrepancies" that "tend to be wilder and crazier the further back and further out one listens" (1994: 100). Listening further back and further out is exactly what Old-time's connoisseurs of offness are doing as they mine rare, old recordings. Participatory discrepancies are found throughout Old-time music as instruments melodically rub up against each other and push and pull against the beat (Carter 1990).<sup>5</sup> Players who embrace offness embrace these subtle tensions and the idiosyncrasies of past players, while resisting contemporary tendencies to standardize the music. However, among the connoisseurs of offness, performing and appreciating these textural discrepancies is a way to demonstrate skill as a listener and performer and to set boundaries built around notions of taste. These subtle shifts in pitch exclude the non-aware listener/player while inviting participation from fellow connoisseurs. In this chapter, I focus on the interaction between a fiddler's finger and the fiddle's

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<sup>5</sup> Tom Carter (1990) describes the way that fiddle and banjo interact in the realms of pitch and rhythm, pushing and pulling each other along in Round Peak fiddle and banjo music. He offers a transcription as well. Although he doesn't describe this interaction in terms of participatory discrepancies, he describes the way that the fiddle and banjos overlapping interaction creates tension, groove, and power. There are limits: in ensemble playing, these discrepancies between players are subtle, playing too far off the beat or too out of tune is recognized as unaccomplished playing even among connoisseurs of offness.

fingerboard, exploring *bad* notes and expressive intonation as a “textural participatory discrepancy” (1994: 100). While an effort to quantify just how bad a bad note is could be instructive (e.g., quantifying actual variations in pitch), it is beyond the scope of my project: I focus instead on the ways that players hear, feel, and conceptualize these dissonances, searching for the meanings that inhere in bad notes and offness.

However, while Keil understands participatory discrepancies as an invitation to participation, I recognize something more complex in bad notes and offness: rather than extending an open invitation for broad participation, these particular participatory discrepancies extend a narrower invitation, perhaps as slender as the bit of fingerboard between a good note and a bad note. Masterful performances of bad notes and offness organize players within the broader scene, creating an exclusive group in a larger scene. Even as Old-time is lauded as a participatory music (Turino 2008), taste, skill, and access to musical resources like old recordings create social stratification; hierarchies form, creating tiers of players and determining who can play with whom. Connoisseurs of bad notes insist that these little musical gestures are critical to the groove and feel of old recordings and view them as the kinds of things that are at risk of being lost as the music moves forward and loses touch with the rich, funky possibilities of oldness.

The ability to hear, feel, and produce bad notes as good intonation or offness as on-ness is about more than just having a good ear: what at first glance seems to be a matter of hearing acuity is actually the cultivation of bodily habits and dispositions and a kind of deeply imaginative hearing (Bourdieu 1984, Mauss 1973). Building on musicologist Christopher Small’s concept of “musicking,” ethnomusicologist Matthew Rahaim describes the “musicking body” as “a trained body in action, engaged mindfully in singing and/or playing an instrument

. . . it is the product of years of discipline and practice (2012: 2). Discipline and practice are key to the cultivation of bad notes; fingers must be retrained to the intervals favored by older players. Likewise, players must adjust bowing pressures and trajectories to accomplish appropriate grittiness. While Rahaim's study traces "the patterns and dispositions of the musicking body, developed from gestural-vocal-postural dispositions made available through teaching lineages" that typically involve face-to-face learning (2012: 159), I examine how Old-time musicians create *listening* lineages and cultivate particular embodied dispositions and habits through the process of emulating sound recordings. Even in the absence of actual face-to-face relationships with the recorded musicians, contemporary players often feel a sense of duty and responsibility to those whose music they learn. For these players, playing bad notes is a way of playing Old-time right. In particular, I show how Old-time players construct and inhabit genealogies of pitch from old recordings.

### **Rounding off the "Sharp Edges": Anxieties about Festivalizing**

Among expert Old-time players and listeners, there is (and has been) a concern that bubbles up in conversations about how the music is changing, what's changing, and whether or not the change is good. In a music built around sounds made and recorded in the past, this kind of anxiety is not surprising. It is a conversational theme when players gather and also when they interact on Facebook. Both in the audience and then after the fact on social media, expert players will debate the judges' choices at the Clifftop contest, hashing out how *Old-time* a particular performance was or, perhaps, blasting the judges' taste for rewarding a pristine, pulsing, newer West Coast sound. Some players refuse to attend Clifftop, which many view as the Old-time mecca, insisting that the jams and the contests there are a watered-down, unrooted version of Old-time; they prefer the Galax Old Fiddler's Convention in Virginia, which they insist rewards

a more grounded, stouter version of the music. Over the last decade, heated debates about taste and perceived changes in the music have played out over Facebook and in threads on popular online sites—like the Banjo Hangout—where players gather.<sup>6</sup>

When connoisseur players criticize performances that they feel are ungrounded, unrooted, and leveled, they may label them “festival style” or “festival fiddling.”<sup>7</sup> A player might accuse another of “festivalizing” a tune or playing a “festivalized version.” The terms are not a dismissal of all festival goers or all music made at festivals. Instead, the word *festival* and its permutations serve as a derogatory shorthand among expert players to talk about a watered down, generic style of playing. It’s difficult to pinpoint the term’s origin, and there is certainly much debate about its meanings.<sup>8</sup> More convincing explanations link the term to the stripped down, basic versions of the music that expert players believe comes from bigger, welcoming jams at festivals like Clifftop. Whatever its origin, the connotation of “festival” is negative, and implies that the player or playing is unstudied, careless, or perhaps skilled but too influenced by popular contemporary players or recordings. Calling someone a “festival fiddler” implies that the player has not done their homework. They haven’t paid their dues as a listener. They’ve missed the most compelling melodic or rhythmic aspects of the tune, especially the subtle twists and turns that connoisseurs

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<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.banjohangout.org/>

<sup>7</sup> I’ve heard some older, more traditional fiddlers label fiddling that I believe would fall in the realm of festival fiddling “hippy fiddling.” The style is often marked by a chugging, and at times frantic, bowing technique. It’s more common to hear the “hippy fiddling” appellation used among musicians who claim familial or community-based connections to the music.

<sup>8</sup> Writing in 1987, expert player Linda Higginbotham identified a festival style of Old-time music. She describes a music with a “particular energy and good-time feelings” that was played and heard at major festivals like Brandywine, Mount Airy, and Galax (Higginbotham 1987: 11). The first players in the style, she explains, drew inspiration from their visits with players like Tommy Jarrell and the twin-fiddling sounds they heard on recordings of bands like the Skillet Lickers. She observes the growth of festival style, “Now the tradition has taken on a life of its own, with the players mainly learning from, playing with, and listening to each other. The style is transmitted through the close contact that these players have with each other, for festival music—although it spreads over great distances—represents a close network of players” (Higginbotham 1987: 11).

find so delightful. Perhaps their bowing is wrong (i.e., inattentive to the connoisseur's interpretation of the tradition), doesn't properly emphasize the downbeat, and has nothing to do with the ways that older players bowed. In using these labels, players position themselves deep in the scene, showing that they perceive and feel a difference between the older ways of making the music and newer ways. They allow a player to stake a claim on tastefulness and proper performance.

Beyond fiddling, the term "festival" and its related terms can also critique other instruments. Guitar playing, for instance, might earn the "festival" label when it employs dramatic chord changes (i.e., minor chords) beyond the I, IV, and V chords often heard on older recordings, or rhythms that stray from the *boom-chuck* (bass note followed by a crisp downward strum) pattern that has been deemed to be the standard backup technique for Old-time guitarist.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, festival-style banjo often refers to a popular clawhammer style of playing that makes excessive use of the fifth-string and rhythmic clucks. This banjo style has an associated timbre—*bassy plunkiness*—that is produced by a thin-rimmed open back banjo played clawhammer style at the point where the neck meets the pot and the tone is less brash.<sup>10</sup> In the rhythmic realm, players speak of "festival rhythms" when they believe the backbeat is over-accented and creates too much of a reggae bounce. Of course, in given moments, these meanings shift, but generally speaking, the term "festival" is used among connoisseur listener/players in a derogatory way to

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<sup>9</sup> Guitarists may seek out instructional materials like guitarist John Schwab's book *Learn from the Masters Old-Time Guitar Backup* and study over his sections titled "The Chords that the Masters *Didn't* Use: Minor and Modal VII" and "Why Do Folks These Days Play So Many Minor and Modal VII Chords?" (2012: 15-17). Schwab writes, "What may be surprising to many modern old-time musicians is how very seldom one hears either a minor chord or a modal VII-chord in the 78 rpm source recordings of the 1920s and '30s" (2012: 15).

<sup>10</sup> Over the last 20 years, a booming custom banjo-building industry has formed around the Old-time scene. Players spend several thousand dollars to purchase banjos made with specific tone rings, rim thicknesses, and heads in a quest for an ideal sound. As opposed to Bluegrass, where players seek clarity and brightness, many Old-time players seek dark and plunky sounds.



describe less-studied and more standardized ways of making Old-time music that are more about creating good feelings through contemporary approaches than getting the music *right*.

For expert North Carolina fiddler Kenny Jackson, this sense of “rightness” or on-ness rests in an elusive *space* that festivals simply don’t foster. During a visit with him in 2014, he eloquently described a fundamental change in how the music feels, attributing many of the changes to the festival scene:

A lot of people today—it’s not just the articulation of notes, and the harmonics, and the chords that have changed it, but it’s also, I think, the whole festival scene over the last twenty-five years that’s changed the music. What I like about the old music is that it had this sense of space to it, where things were happening. Instead of just this sort of driving groove, this pulsing groove that—that’s a whole lot of fun in its own way, but it doesn’t have that same sense of space in the music and between the notes. It gives room for different kind of expression in the music. Room to explore something in a little different way. (Jackson 2014)

For Kenny, the rhythmic density and pulsing drive of the festival style of Old-time music is, though fun in its own way, an unwelcome break with the past. Unsweetened, unresolved, and sparse accompaniment generates a different musical sound and experience than contemporary styles that value layered, harmonized fiddles and tension-easing chords. The sense of spaciousness that he hears in the old recordings—a spaciousness that leaves room for creativity and expression—has been traded for something gratifying in the short run but ultimately less satisfying.<sup>11</sup> In voicing his tastes, Kenny positions himself as a deep listener and appreciator of the older ways of playing. His interpretation of how the music has been festivalized is one of many circulating among listening connoisseurs.

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<sup>11</sup> In Old-Time music, musical space is created and manipulated, in part, through rhythmic and melodic choices. Musicians feel and locate their bodies and the music in these spaces. Players often spatialize the beat, asking a fellow player to “move up on” or “get behind” the beat. Depending on personal taste, players may avoid accompanists who tend to push or lean back on the beat. Expert musicians seek out others who can create the right rhythmic feel and sense of space.

Expert fiddler Jim Collier, who hung out with and learned music from Doc Watson's family, explained this homogenizing and leveling trend to me during a visit with him at his home in Raleigh, North Carolina:

Now anybody anywhere can learn any tune no matter how obscure. There's a recording of it somewhere that's accessible. So, what ends up happening is—is that a person can play like Marcus Martin, and he can play like W. M. Stepp, and he can play like Tommy Jarrell, and he can . . . because he's got all these influences, all these things. But, what ends up happening is that it ends up becoming more homogenized. And there's less sharp edges to all these little regional gems. (Collier 2014)

For many expert players and listeners, edges are critical to the music. Maintaining the distinctive qualities of individual master players is one of the challenges facing Old-time connoisseur players, especially in an era when a player has access to a seemingly endless well of source recordings. Circulation and access allow obscure repertoires and styles to be perpetuated, but they also inundate players with new musical options. Rendering recording-informed, nuance-filled performances requires maintenance and sustained listening, lest the edges that distinguish one old player from another get indistinct. Rounding “sharp edges” off of beautiful music is a trait of festivalizing music or of a shallow listening practice.

### **The “Berklee Kids”**

Beyond fears of festivalization, concerns over changes in the music find a particular (and perhaps unmerited) focal point in the “Berklee kids” and what they might do to the music. The “Berklee kids” refers to younger players in their teens and twenties who may or may not have actually gone to Berklee, but who have astoundingly high levels of skill. Their knowledge of Old-time is often the result of experiences at elite fiddle camps where they had access to and instruction from top players in a range of fiddle genres. With considerable classical training, they are often proficient in several fiddle styles (e.g., Texas Contest, Irish, Bluegrass, or New Acoustic). Devotees of offness are likely to criticize these players for their overly polished sound

and for shallow listening. In many ways, whether they attend a conservatory program or not, they come to represent these institutions and the changes that more tradition-minded players fear are reshaping the music through unprecedented levels of classical training and skill.

As institutions like the Berklee College of music and East Tennessee State University institutionalize Old-time music and introduce a generation of conservatory trained musicians to the teaching camps, into festivals, and onto stages, many of my conversation partners fear that the music is changing for the worse and that the music's subtler yet compelling qualities, like offness, will be ironed out, codified, or standardized. They find the sonic cleanliness and precise intonation of these prodigies bland. And when these conservatory players attempt to incorporate microtonal dissonance, these same critics often find it unconvincing, affected, and belabored. Some critics claim that they all are replicating the sound of a particularly influential fiddler, mimicking a highly-syncopated pulsing style currently in favor at Berklee, one that a friend from Tennessee jokingly calls "New York Style" Old-time.

Old-time music in conservatories and higher education presents problems for the participatory and relationship-driven values that many musicians ascribe to the music. Other scholars have examined issues created when traditional music enters into conservatory programs (see, e.g., Hill 2009, Keegan-Phipps 2007). In her study of conservatory folk music programs, ethnomusicologist Juniper Hill observes that these programs tend to have "artifying effects . . . such as increases in competitiveness, virtuosity, prestige/status, formal contexts, and professionalism" (Hill 2009: 219). In England, ethnomusicologist Simon Keegan-Phipps describes his interlocutors' fears of elitism, standardization, and ossification that come as degree-bearing "folk music elite" emerge from a program of "emulation of an unhealthily small number

of musicians” (2007: 102). My conversation partners in the Old-time world echo these anxieties as they watch these highly skilled younger musicians trickle onto the scene.

In their ethnographies of American conservatory culture, anthropologists Henry Kingsbury (1988) and Eitan Wilf (2014) describe a culture that embodies the productivism and romantic individualism of Euro-American society.<sup>12</sup> Applying a Protestant work ethic to learning Old-time, and seeking to develop one’s innovative and fresh musical voice, strike some of my interlocutors as the antithesis of Old-time. These values don’t align with understandings of Old-time that idealize face-to-face visits with old masters and relationships. These relationships were less about finding one’s artistic self than about getting the music right in the eyes and ears of the elder players. For many of my consultants, learning Old-time in a conservatory is an oxymoron. Therefore, to push back against the influx of conservatory trained musicians is to resist the values inherent in the elite world they come from. It’s also a way of recognizing that that form of training is no substitute for a lifetime of intense listening and learning in the scene, a process akin to “paying your dues” in the Jazz scene (Berliner 1994: 51-55): one cannot magically become a fiddler through a four-year course of study or through elite youth fiddle camps that often serve as a pipeline into programs like Berklee’s.<sup>13</sup>

Having taught in a conservatory setting, I have observed the ways that students in that setting engage the music and the subtle forms of competition that can develop in that environment. During the academic year of 2012 to 2013, I taught Old-time fiddle and banjo in

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<sup>12</sup> On this point, I owe a considerable debt to my writing partner and fellow musical explorer Jay Hammond. An anthropologist and a graduate of Berklee’s jazz undergraduate program, his work has shaped my thinking about conservatory values and their relationships to Old-time music.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the Berklee program and the ETSU both involve intensive face-to-face lessons. The instructors are often players, like expert fiddler Bruce Molsky, who spent considerable time visiting old masters and listening deeply to old recordings.

East Tennessee State University's Bluegrass, Old-time, and Country Music program. While not a typical conservatory program, the program places considerable emphasis on performance, and a handful of graduates, especially in the bluegrass side of things, have made relatively successful careers as musicians. In the Old-time program, there is an effort to get students to delve into older local repertoires and styles. But the program has a strong performance aspect, and there is considerable emphasis placed on stage performances of Old-time music. To get a sense of how things worked in the music instruction front at ETSU, I played fiddle in their showcase Old-time band during my first semester there under the guidance of a colleague. This involved regular rehearsals and public performances around the region. From my impressions, the purpose of the band was: a) to help players cultivate the range of skills necessary to be in a working band; b) to develop tight stage shows; and c) and to explore and perform local repertoire. As the top Old-time band, we understandably spent significant portions of our practice running through concert sets, developing stage banter, and choreographing our use of the single microphone that we used of our practice oriented towards stage performance. We played anywhere from one to three public shows a week around the region. Our performances were professional and the students were becoming very accomplished players. Top students were eager to have opportunities to showcase their skills, and it was not unusual for top student players to get in funks if they felt like they weren't given enough time to shine as we put together our sets. Sets represented a delicate process of negotiation and compromise between students vying for their moment in the limelight.

Having entered into the music from a completely different path—learning from friends and recordings, attending festivals and jamming, and visiting older players—the focus on performance among developing players differed significantly from my experiences and gave me

pause. It was a departure from the festival learning and wintertime woodshedding through which many expert players have cultivated their skills and enjoyed the music. Although staged performances are and long have been a part of the music, they have historically been secondary to the less formal, more social and participatory world in which I had learned the music.<sup>14</sup> The musicians I knew were in it for pleasure and community rather than gigs and reputation. After all, as Mike Seeger—one of the most respected performers in the genre—pointed out, there’s limited demand and work for Old-time musicians: “Probably five and no more than ten musicians make their full-time living playing old-time music, depending on your definitions of ‘old-time’ and ‘a living’” (Seeger 1997). For me, gigs had been lucky coincidences that came from working hard at my playing and cultivating good music with friends. They weren’t the focal point: they grew out of social music making. Relationships cultivated at festivals over years have made the music richer for me. It seemed that some of these students were missing that vital social aspect.

Conservatory-styled Old-time learning places considerable emphasis on stage performances. As players make their way through these sorts of programs, some stick with Old-time while others dabble in it or create fusion bands. Among those who’ve trained in these environments, a handful gig as Old-time musicians and compete for faculty and performance slots at festivals and camps, leveraging their credentials and connections to get work. Unsurprisingly, the fact that these conservatory trained players get gigs and accolades creates

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<sup>14</sup> To be sure, Old-time music has long been a part of stage performances. Many of the early recording artists, like Chattanooga Bob Douglas, did stints in medicine shows and knew how to entertain. I don’t wish to ignore that aspect of the music’s history. However, there are far less opportunities and audiences for performers of Old-time than for a genre like Bluegrass. It seems that most Old-time musicians are as interested in making the music themselves as in attending a concert.

some ill-feeling among some players who learned through different processes or who value other aspects of the music.

Some perspective is helpful. In 2014, I was visiting with Old-time musician Alice Gerrard at her home in Durham, North Carolina. In her early 80s, Alice has been a fixture in the Old-time and Bluegrass music scenes since the mid-century folk revival, receiving a Grammy nomination and being inducted into the International Bluegrass Music Association's Hall of Fame in 2017. Known for her singing, she has also made a deep study of Old-time fiddle traditions, moving to Galax, Virginia, at one point to be closer to an older generation of musicians and singers. During my visit, she played me a fiddle tune she learned from an older Virginia fiddler that had what she called "notes between notes." "We don't have any notation that incorporates the sound," she told me (Gerrard 2014). As we discussed the ways that contemporary players either use or don't use these sorts of notes, she talked about the cultivation of an ear and musical taste, and the practice of intense and sustained listening and learning:

Their [attendees at music workshops] ears just haven't listened to the old stuff. That's one thing I always tell people: you've just got to listen—listen, listen, listen, listen—because your ear doesn't—I don't think, doesn't naturally [hear these notes]. You know, we've grown up with classical music and pop music. You wouldn't believe how hard it is to get people to sing a blue note—a flatted note—in a singing class. Their ear doesn't go there. It's so weird. I think it's the same with this kind of stuff. If you haven't listened to it and are not aware of these sounds that can exist, and think of them as beautiful and ethereal and weird. It's the weird old America. I think some people are getting it. There's a really healthy resurgence of interest in traditional music and a lot of young people are playing and probably ten percent of them are really going to get it. And that's good. That's all it's ever been. (Gerrard 2014)

Alice's pronouncement about younger players getting the music right begs the question: *if only ten percent of players will really get the music, how will they get it? Does a young fiddler get it by attending a four-year conservatory style program?* A critical feature of mastery, as she understands it, relies on the musician's ability to hear, feel, recognize, and replicate the genre's

“beautiful and ethereal and weird” sounds. Her words echo other conversations with expert contemporary Old-time fiddlers who articulate a preference for sounds that many uninitiated listeners hear and feel as dissonant, out of tune, or *off*.

### **A History of Bad Notes**

If the aesthetic of offness as on-ness is cultivated through intense listening and study of old field and commercial recordings, then one is led to ask: *How did the revered old players think about things like bad notes? Were these meaningful sounds?*<sup>15</sup> Charles Keil’s “participatory discrepancies” suggests that they are (1994). Eastern Kentucky Fiddler John Salyer (1882-1952), whose field recordings and tunes circulate widely and wildly among contemporary musicians, used the evocative term “wild” note to describe the microtones heard among fiddlers in Magoffin County, Kentucky (Titon 2001: 20).<sup>16</sup> Historically, some players recognized as “source musicians” have identified particular kinds of offness as a component of their styles and described them as affectively potent (Milnes 1999). Careful listening to older recordings reveals a diversity of approaches to pitch and intonation. Articulated in deeply personal and expressive ways, bad notes and wild notes—microtones and alternate tonal sensibilities—shaped the playing of a number of source musicians field recorded in the last century from John Salyer to Marcus Martin. Bad notes can be heard in the playing of key source musicians of the 1970s Old-time

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<sup>15</sup> It also emerges from firsthand study under players like Tommy Jarrell, who incorporated dissonant intervals to great effect throughout his fiddling.

<sup>16</sup> Jeff Todd Titon’s *Kentucky Old-Time Fiddle Tunes* includes transcriptions of tunes that include microtones and a discussion of “wild” notes. Also in Alan Lomax’s recordings of John Salyer’s neighbors Bill Stepp and Luther Strong, we encounter more wild notes—microtones—as a distinguishing feature of their music (Wade 2012: 284-286). For a discussion and transcription of Luther Strong’s fiddling and use of microtones, see Stephen Wade’s book *The Beautiful Music All Around Us: Field Recordings and the American Experience* (2012).



revival such as Tommy Jarrell and Melvin Wine.<sup>17</sup> In fact Melvin Wine recalled waking up as a child and being deeply moved by the affective power of his father's rendering of "Lady's Waist Ribbon," a tune in which he plays with expressive intonation, pushing some notes sharp, "Dad would play that, and I'd wake up a crying. I just couldn't stand the sound. I don't know what about it, but I'd just cry every time he'd play it" (Milnes 1999: 6). Practitioners like Melvin Wine understood these sorts of notes not as poor intonation and inadequate skill, but as subtle, affectively potent expressions of mastery and taste. Older players, it seems, were aware of these small sonic gestures.

During the early 1900s, as folklorists, researchers, and festival organizers began to conceive of fiddle music as a form of folklore to be documented and presented, these off sounds began to register in the ears of collectors and presenters. Occasionally, some collectors attempted to "correct" and corral them back into more familiar Western music conceptual models. For example, zealous festival organizers working at the infamously racist Whitetop Mountain Folk festival in 1930s' Virginia groomed performers to play melodies that resonated with their notions of what Anglo-Saxon Appalachian whiteness sounded like. Many of their notions had been established in the work of English ballad collector Cecil Sharp's work with English and, later, Appalachian singers (Sharp 1907, 1917: xv-xviii). Sharp, who described folk songs as "race-products," constructed an elaborate argument for the folk authenticity and oldness of modal melodies (Sharp 1907:136). He insisted, "The mode provides a most efficient instrument for the

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<sup>17</sup> Old-Time musician and folklorist Tom Carter offers an insightful discussion and transcription of Tommy Jarrell's fiddle performance of "Old Bunch of Keys" and fretless banjo player Fred Cockerham's accompaniment. Besides his attention to Cockerham's microtones, he describes a sense of offness that plays a critical role: "In the music of the New River Valley generally, we find instead of perfect unison, often discordant harmonies (such as minor thirds and even seconds) scattered here and there, and instead of rhythmic symmetry—the mashing down on the downbeat—we discover a dynamic rhythmic counterpoint, all of which results in a subtle tension that is 'felt' more than heard and that gives the string band much of its power, both aesthetically and intellectually" (Carter 1990: 71-73). Carter's describes the offness, rhythmic, and intonational wiggles of Keil's participatory discrepancies.

making of melody, pure and simple; and it is with such melody that the folk are exclusively concerned. It is the peasant idiom, and the folk-singer uses it because it fits his purpose, and suits his taste better than any other scale” (Sharp 1907:125).

Following Cecil Sharp’s line of thinking, the Whitetop festival organizers fetishized the modes that they perceived to be folkier and older, especially the spooky sounding Dorian mode with its minor third and flat seventh, hearing it as a marker of authentic white Anglo tradition.<sup>18</sup> Festival organizer Annabel Morris Buchanan, for example, attempted to tame Smyth County, Virginia, banjo player Jack Reedy’s wild and ambiguous thirds. In her correspondence, she recalls her effort to align his slippery notes with her Dorian agenda, “He played a breathtakingly fast piece he called the Fox chase, all in dorian mode; (only of course he never played them the same way twice). . . . I want him to play his Black Gal and Cluck Old Hen in the contest (he played it dorian again, then mixolydian!) I showed him how to keep it dorian.” (Whisnant 2009: 231-232). Buchanan’s intervention—showing Reedy how to keep his playing Dorian—reveals her inability to recognize the ambiguity and microtonal potential of the third in “Cluck Old Hen.” Like many field and commercially recorded fiddlers and banjo players who were born in the South in the 1800s or at the turn of the 20th century, Reedy treats the third of the scale (think of the *mi* pitch in *do-re-mi*) ambiguously and expressively, often nudging it sharp or flat. Nevertheless, Buchanan imposes her framework on his performance, following Sharp’s agenda, namely his concern with modes and their implied oldness (and whiteness).

Banjoist Jack Reedy, the subject of her intervention, was hardly the rustic bearer of primitive Anglo survivals that Annabel Morris Buchanan wished (or groomed) him to be. To the contrary, he toured the East Coast and participated in bands at the forefront of a dynamic genre

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<sup>18</sup> For readers less familiar with music terminology, “Scarborough Fair” offers a handy sense what the Dorian mode sounds and feels like.

that was gaining commercial traction and broader circulation during the late 1920s (Lornell 1989: 101). Reedy was a top-shelf, innovative banjo player whose fingerpicking style anticipated the bluegrass style that would emerge in the 1940s (Lornell 1989: 11). Just four years before Buchanan sought to iron out his thirds, he had traveled to New York City to participate in a commercial recording session with the iconic Old-time band, The Hillbillies. Among the sides that they recorded in this session on Friday, May 13, 1927, was a rendition of “Cluck Old Hen,” the very tune that so perplexed Buchanan (Russell 2004: 600). The tune is tucked in among the day’s work in the studio, including some syrupy waltzes from turn-of-the-century sheet music, a couple of humorous songs of the same vintage, and some traditional pieces. In this eclectic offering, the poultry-inspired piece stands out for its modal ambiguity. On the record, the fiddling and singing treat the third ambiguously, slipping and sliding into it, gaining traction somewhere between the minor and the major third. Likewise, Reedy, who fingerpicked a high-quality fretted resonator Gibson banjo (hardly the banjo of a primitive mountaineer), smears or bends the note in question, sounding out the wildness that Annabel Morris Buchanan was unable to appreciate. Left to his own devices, Reedy works around the limits of the frets, sliding ambiguously over them and pushing the string up to raise the pitch, and makes music that defies Buchanan’s categories or representational projects.

Not long after Buchanan attempted to realign Reedy’s banjo playing with her bizarre conflation of medieval modes and fetishized Anglo mountaineer ancestors, musicologist David Parker Bennett was displaying a more thoughtful approach to differences of taste in intonation and intervals in his work with western North Carolina fiddler Bill Hensley. In his 1940s master’s thesis on western North Carolina fiddle music, Bennett attempted to render the pitchy puzzle and techniques he recorded and heard in seventy-year-old Bill Hensley’s fiddling into a thoroughly

modern research project built upon “objective, scientifically useful material” (1940: i). To do this work, Bennett enlisted two sound engineers at WWNC in Asheville, the radio station’s audio equipment, and ten-inch Presto acetate discs. “An electrical Victrola with a turntable speed adjuster, and place to plug in ear-phones . . . a very light pick-up arm (an ounce or less) . . . and a sapphire playing needle” allowed Bennett to scrutinize the performances (1940: 24). Even after Bennett had “objectively recorded, carefully transcribed, and systematically analyzed” Hensley’s playing, there are recalcitrant wild notes that resist his thoroughly modern, technologically empowered “objective study of the folk-art of fiddle playing” (1940: I).

These differences in intonation struck Bennett from his first encounter with Hensley. He recalled the moment:

When I heard Fiddlin’ Bill play for the first time, I was instantly attracted by his lively and spirited manner of performing, by his evident enjoyment in what he was doing; but the tunes themselves, I must confess, left me rather bewildered. The intervals and rhythms sounded strange and were hard for me to understand at first hearing. I was conscious of the scraping of his bow and the imperfection in his technique which I judged according to the standards that I was used to. (1940: 14)

Beyond the alternate techniques and aesthetic (e.g., a preference for percussive, crunchy bow sounds), the sound of Hensley’s playing would have been even stranger to Bennett’s ears because of Hensley’s preference to tune his fiddle sharp of concert pitch to around 445 HZ (Bennett 1940: 11). Yet, unlike Annabel Morris Buchanan, Bennett, with a kind of Boasian cultural insight, recognized the ways that classrooms and concert halls had shaped his own musical sensibilities. While Bennett lived in the ocularcentric realm of scores and transcriptions, Fiddlin’ Bill rooted his music making in the body: when Bennett asked the older fiddler how he remembered his repertoire, Hensley responded with Zen simplicity, “I play them with my fingers” (Bennett 1940:20).

Hensley's fingers don't merely remember his tunes; they also create an expressive world of intonation and intervals that defy conventional transcription methods and dominant temperaments. Hensley's fingers measure miniscule distances on the string, creating a sound that distinguishes his playing from others and opens up a world expressive possibilities. These fingers accomplish these shifts with consistency and intention, voicing a note in one place for a particular tune and then shifting it a smidge sharp to create tension in another piece. For ears tuned by equally tempered sonic regimes, Hensley's music can feel edgy, anxious, and unresolved. There is a faint sourness in it. However, Hensley was not the only player inhabiting this wooly world of intervals and pitch. His



Figure 21 (above): "Fiddlin' Bill Hensley, mountain fiddler, Asheville, North Carolina" Ben Shahn 1937, from the Library of Congress. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsc.00252>

contemporaries in the fiddle community of Western North

Carolina—Marcus Martin, Osey Helton, Manco Sneed, and Dedrick Harris—all inhabited worlds of pitch marked by creative and expressive intonation that is consistent with itself. There are moments when Marcus Martin's playing tends towards just intonation, sounding particularly stark. Manco Sneed's playing, in turn, is full of expressive intonation subtle dissonance.

As for Hensley's "strange" intervals and the wild, microtonal notes, Bennett, uncertain of their origin or meaning, describes them with the language of the music scholar in a section introducing his transcriptions of Hensley's playing:

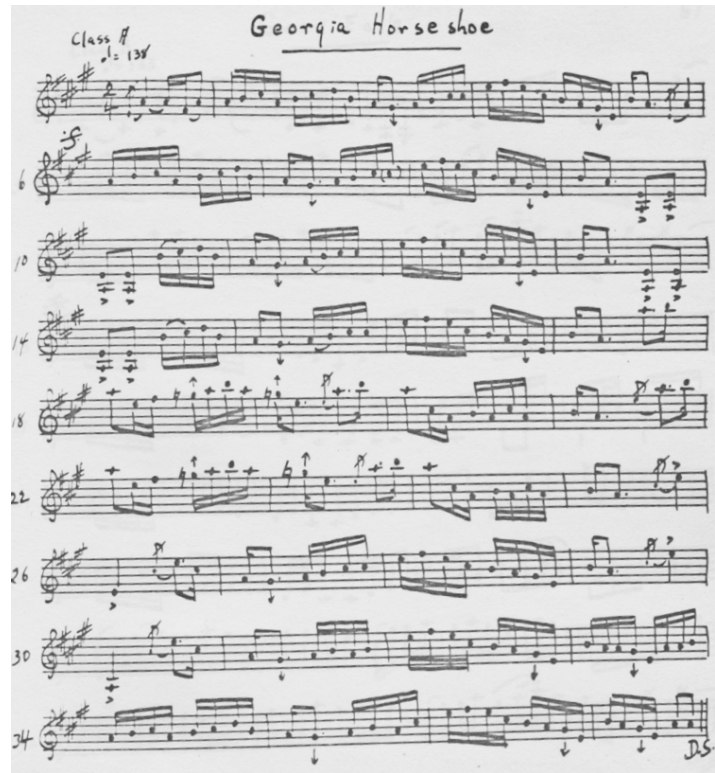
In several of the tunes certain notes were played flat or sharp. Wherever it is clear that this was done intentionally and not due merely to bad intonation, it is indicated by an arrow. Bill's intonation was remarkably accurate, considering the conditions under which he played. (Bennett 1940: 38)

Throughout his thesis, arrows point up and down, marking places where Bennett believes Hensley *intended* to employ expressive intonation. Hensley was aware of pitch and the way certain notes made particular tunes feel, referring to the spooky or lonesome sounding flatted sevenths in dance tunes like "Paddy on the Turnpike," and pieces made for listening like "Georgia Belles" as "one of them minors" (1940: 53).

"Georgia Horseshoe," one of Bennett's arrow-filled transcriptions, points to the presence of microtones in Hensley's fiddling.

The three-part tune is played in what Hensley calls "Shelton Laurel key" (Bennett 1940: 13). To achieve this tuning, the G and D strings are raised to A and E respectively, creating powerful drones. In Bennett's transcription, arrows hover above the G natural on the E string, nudging it ever so slightly sharp. They tug down on the G# on the D string (now tuned to E) pulling the note a hair flat. The distances on the

Figure 22 (below): David Parker Bennett's transcription of Bill Hensley's "Georgia Horseshoe." Note the arrows that indicate microtonal "bad" notes. (From Bennett 1940)



fingerboard and the changes of pitch that these arrows translate are miniscule—a matter of rocking the pad of the second finger slightly forward or backward. But the arrows and transcriptions have their limits: on Bennett's recordings, I hear Hensley push the flatted G#

against the droning open A below it (Bennet's transcription doesn't capture this drone), creating a powerful, throbbing and honking dissonance. More generally, Hensley's intonation serves as a calling card, adding an expressive edge to his performances and creating a distinctive intonational profile in the world of Western North Carolina fiddlers, one that notably included a number of Cherokee musicians.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In fact, Hensley tells Bennett that he learned the piece "Georgia Horseshoe" from a Cherokee fiddler named Junaluska. Beyond its wild notes, "Georgia Horseshoe" recalls an understudied tradition of Cherokee fiddling and raises questions about how Cherokee music making, and more specifically, Cherokee understandings and aesthetics of pitch and tonality, might have shaped fiddling in Hensley's Western North Carolina world. As early as 1809, Major John Newton, a visitor to the Cherokee nation observed Cherokee fiddling along the edges of what is now Tennessee and North Carolina (Norton 1970:42). Norton offered the following description from his 1809 visit:

Afterwards an English Dance was struck up in the house. They now begin to be very fond of these dances, but for want of skilful teachers, none have yet acquired any proficiency in music; the fiddlers seem only to imitate their own simple notes (Norton Talman 1970:42).

I saw an elderly man. who seemed to have something of a mechanical genius for he had nearly completed several fiddles. which he shewed me with no small air of self approbation. (Norton 1970:120)

The story of Cherokee fiddling continues into the 1830s. Documents from the Cherokee removal in the late 1830s suggest fiddling continued up through the forced removal and into resettlement in Oklahoma (Riggs 1999: 281-282). At the time of the Cherokee removal in the late 1830s, four fiddles show up in Cherokee claims of property loss. Wachacha, the brother of the elder Junaluska, claimed a fiddle among lost property as well (Riggs 1999: 281). Alex and Jackson Raper, earlier fiddlers in Cherokee fiddler Manco Sneed's family line, purchased strings and a fiddle from a store near Huntington (present-day Murphy, NC) (Riggs 2017). Though far from comprehensive, these shreds of information hint at a tradition of fiddle and dance music among the Cherokee.

There were a number of Cherokee fiddlers in Hensley's orbit. Hensley tells Bennett that "Georgia Horseshoe" came from the repertoire of a Cherokee fiddler named Junaluska (not to be confused with the leader Junaluska who died before Hensley's time in 1858), whom Hensley saw perform when he was a child. Another piece in Hensley's repertoire, "Snowbird on the Ashbank," also came from Junaluska (Bennett 1940: 22). Besides Junaluska, Hensley names a handful of other Cherokee fiddlers, including John Rose, Charlie Crisp, and John Sneed's boy, presumably Manco Sneed, who was recorded later in the century by folklorists (Owen 1980). "They all play my old-timey pieces," Hensley tells Bennett about these Cherokee players, revealing an older, shared repertoire (Bennet 1940: 22). Along with these Cherokee fiddlers, Ernest and Osey Helton, who claimed Cherokee roots, were Hensley's contemporaries in the region, sharing repertoire and stages. To complicate matters more, Osey Helton learned to play much of his music from an African American freedman who worked with his father making whiskey barrels in Asheville at the turn of the 20th century (Carlin 2007:15). The cultural complexity of Hensley's musical world matches its tonal complexity. Clearly, Cherokee fiddling predates Hensley, shapes his repertoire, and contributes to his sense of the music's oldness.

It is also worth noting that Chattanooga and champion fiddler Bob Douglas recalls traveling to Cherokee, North Carolina to play Old-time music sometime in the mid to late 1920s: "I met the Allen Brothers in Chattanooga and I started playing some with them. . . . We got together one year, and went up to Cherokee, North Carolina to the Indian Fair. We stayed in a tent in a big field. Played in a little contest" (Fulcher 2008: 16).

Hensley was committed to maintaining a repertoire of tunes he believed to be old—tunes that were filled with subtle dissonances. Oldness and offness blended. His “musicking body” mastered the older pieces with their particular bowings and fingerings (Rahaim 2012). “Well, I’ll tell you, I’d have to change my bow-arm, and I might forget the old tunes. I’ve been advised to stick to my old-timey music because I play it so well. Well, I’ll tell you, Mr. Bennett, I could learn that new stuff in a week if I wanted to,” Hensley responded when Bennett asked if he had any interest in learning newer music (Bennet 1940: 22). Just as he claims his fingers play the tunes, he recognizes that they are brought to life through his finely-tuned bow-arm—one that would have had to be retrained to capture the rhythms and phrasing of new tunes. For Hensley, bowing techniques differentiate old playing from new playing.

### **Getting Bad Notes under the Finger**

Three or four years ago, I began studying the complex playing of Cherokee fiddler Manco Sneed (one of Bill Hensley’s western North Carolina peers). His playing is filled with nuance. Bowed triplets, an ornament heard on field recordings of an older generation of Appalachian fiddlers, adorn his playing. His fingers elaborate captivating melodies with intricately tangled cascades of notes. The location and pitch of his notes shift in confounding, powerful ways. There are bad notes and offness in his playing that make it supremely appealing to a handful of contemporary players.<sup>20</sup> I began learning Sneed’s version of “Snowbird,” a piece that Bill Hensley also played (and attributed to Cherokee fiddler Junaluska), and one that was

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<sup>20</sup> While Old-time musicians have fallen in love with the sound of Sneed’s fiddling, it was too much for the producers of Disney’s 1955 “Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier.” Filmed in Cherokee, Manco Sneed was hired to “play” fiddle in a square dance scene. It looks exactly how one would imagine a pioneer square dance scene in a 1950s Disney’s film. In his brief snippet on the camera, he wears an absurd buckskin outfit and coonskin hat, holds the fiddle the old way (i.e., off of his chest), and appears to fiddle. The fiddle sound in the film doesn’t sync with his playing. I assume that his playing was too real for the producers: during the scene, they pipe in a cheesy, clear recording of fiddle music that I imagine was made in some Hollywood studio.



likely named for a traditional Cherokee community in the western part of the state or, possibly, for the dark-eyed Junco (*junco hyemalis*) that refuses to migrate and spends snowy winters in the mountains. I quickly found myself lost on the violin fingerboard.

Digital technologies mediate much learning in Old-time (see chapter 4), allowing players to gain access to the subtlest aspects of the music. My effort to master “Snowbird” utilized powerful slow-downer digital technologies that allowed me to engage with offness in precise digital ways that can quantify and visualize it. Judging from my experiences teaching traditional music to university students and at camps in the U.S. and abroad, these slow-downer technologies are widely used for learning contemporary Old-time music.<sup>21</sup>

Allow me to describe the process: *After I attach my external hard drive to my laptop, I search through thousands of old fiddle tunes on iTunes, scrolling through several versions of “Snowbird” until I find the one from Sneed that that suits my ears—a crystallized musical idea captured on reel-to-reel and then digitized and converted into an mp3. It’s anybody’s guess how it got to me. I drag it into a software called “Transcribe” that I purchased online for \$30. The tune registers in the software as a long undulating visualization of soundwaves. Sneed’s fiddle*

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<sup>21</sup> This way of hearing and learning, especially the ability to slow a recorded performance down, is not new. My first fiddler teacher, Tennessee fiddler Charlie Acuff, grew up during the era of 78s and recalled techniques that he and his brothers used to slow down the playback of those records. Charlie would keep his instrument in his hand to try to catch an elusive phrase. His brother Gayle would manually slow the spinning disc down, lowering the pitch while slowing the recording. It was hardly a precise science. Charlie still had to hear intervals and translate the lowered pitch to his instrument.

My own learning of this music has taken all sorts of shapes. There have been mimetic moments during visits with older players in which I’ve attempted to replicate motions and sounds as I sat alongside them. Tapes from these visits have filled in what I couldn’t absorb in the moment. I have learned tunes on-the-fly from friends late at night under a camping tarp at Old-Time music festivals. Some tunes have materialized in my mind—perhaps from hearing them over years—and found their way out as soon I picked up my instrument. These ways of learning the music fit into the face-to-face models idealized (and imagined) by Old-Time musicians. However, the process I describe here is fairly common among serious musicians who have not had access to older “source” musicians, which is more often the case these days.

*was tuned a bit below pitch, so I adjust the pitch in the software. I plug in my headphones and start listening, as a little cursor floats through the visualization of the tune.*

*My headphones transport me deep into the sound. I listen intently and, with fiddle in hand, try to replicate the sounds. The beginning of the high part of the tune confuses me. I mark the section, and the software repeats it continuously. Failing to make sense of the tangle of notes, I slow it down to thirty percent of its original speed. The chunk of the tune repeats over and over. The notes begin to fall into place in my mind and on the fingerboard. But there is a shift in pitch that throws me—a supremely subtle flattening of the seventh (the F#) on the E string. The software has a feature that can guess a note and locate it on a digital keyboard, but I don't trust the feature. So I keep listening and tinkering with my finger placement. It's maddening.*

*The sound challenges me. My pointer finger, trained to land squarely on the F# of the treble E string (for the key of G), resists the location where Sneed places his potent note. I push my finger into this new territory and the familiar distances of the G scale collapse. My fingers are adrift. Getting this tune right requires me to retool my left hand. Over months I work to learn Sneed's fingerboard (or at least to approximate it). It is primarily a matter of listening repeatedly and getting the sounds in my head. At times this listening is focused and intent. At others it is distracted and loose. Then, when I pick up my fiddle, I try to capture the note again, sometimes nailing it and sometimes missing it.*

In contrast to a looser, less detail-oriented ways of learning (that might yield a “festival” version), this type of repeated listening and sustained learning allows for unprecedented precision and relies heavily on powerful sound technologies. It can even change the way that face-to-face learning takes place. Expert musician Jim Collier explains: “If you want to learn something—you want to study it, you'll put on slow downer and go through it and listen to all

the nuances. And you might go back and brush up if the fiddler happens to be alive. You might go and sit with them and say, ‘Yeah that’s what I was trying to do, thanks.’ But most of that stuff—it’s all digestible now” (Collier 2014). Modes of learning flip. Rather than serving as a reference for face-to-face learning, the recording becomes the primary text, and the face-to-face visit becomes the reference for the recording.

As players have access to these affordable technologies, understandings of what constitutes a satisfactory rendition of an older source recording begin to shift. Offness can be scrutinized, visualized, quantified, and potentially fetishized in ways that face-to-face learning wouldn’t allow. In some ways, this software replaces and enhances the finite natural ear with a digital ear capable of hearing and analyzing the minutest sonic details.<sup>22</sup> The headphones and software allow contemporary Old-Time musicians to inhabit the tune in ways that defy time and expand their musical abilities. If they choose, it allows them to see where a note falls or, in the case of bad notes, into which crack on the keyboard it slips.

### **Constructing Lineages of Pitch: Seeking Rules of Offness and Bad Notes**

As players incorporate bad notes into performances, they also enter into discussions that attempt to chart the parameters of this aesthetic and of expressive intonation in Old-time. While this is often a matter of debate among the particular experts who are invested in offness, it also

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<sup>22</sup> Writing about prosthetics and controversies around Olympian runner Oscar Pistorius’s carbon fiber blades—devices that enabled the double-amputee athlete to run and compete at the highest level—Anne Cranny-Francis highlights anxieties over whether the prosthetic devices give him an unfair advantage. She writes: “When the prosthetics are seen as conferring greater or different capabilities, the challenge to some essentialist notion of human embodiment becomes even more acute” (Cranny-Francis 2013: 183). She suggests that as prosthetic devices develop, they may actually expand the experiences available to humans, transforming normative notions of ‘the human’ (ibid.) Although her work comes from the intersection of disability studies and new technologies, I think the newer, digital technologies available to Old-time musicians allow musicians to experience the music in new ways that allow for unprecedented precision. However, these technologies ultimately rely on the musician’s skills. As I’ve pointed out, the use of technology in learning through manually slowing down a 78 or 33, or slowing a cassette tape, have long been a part of learning practices. However, digital technologies facilitate new experiences with the music in ways that differ significantly from older methods.

trickles into more accessible sites of learning. Consider the following section on “Neutral Notes” from expert fiddler and popular teacher Brad Leftwich’s *Old-time Fiddle: Round Peak Style* (2011):

Traditional fiddling uses microtones that fall between the steps of the tempered scale used in most classical and popular music, most often involving a G and/or C that is somewhere between natural and sharp. These aren’t mistakes or intonation problems—it’s a different aesthetic, and once your ears get used to the sound, you’ll find it adds a special, indispensable flavor to the music. . . . Again, use your ears. (2011: 14)

Even as Leftwich points to the importance of bad notes, he also acknowledges that acquiring a taste for offness is ultimately a matter of listening—*use your ears*. There are plenty of contemporary Old-time musicians who hear bad notes as being out of tune or who don’t even hear them. However, for those who do hear a bad note as good intonation, there is an effort to discern patterns in these older, more dissonant aesthetics.<sup>23</sup> Close listening and internalizing old

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<sup>23</sup> While many contemporary fiddlers attribute bad notes and offness to older aesthetics, some speculate about the role of manual labor in shaping a player’s body and sound. Fiddlers have long been attentive to the impact of work on their hands and bow arms. Fiddlin’ Bill Hensley was acutely aware of how his manual labor impacted his hands. David Parker Bennett relates this point:

When I went out to his home to carry him to town to record, he told me that he hadn’t touched his fiddle in three weeks and that he had been working out in the field so much that his fingers had ‘spread.’ Even with this handicap, the seventy-year-old man’s fingers moved as nimbly as a young boy’s. (Bennett 1940: 38)

Other fiddlers are also attentive to the ways that work shapes their playing. Playing an instrument on which the subtlest of finger shifts can be profoundly expressive leads fiddlers to be extremely conscious of how responsive and nimble their fingers are. My longtime music partner and inspiration, fiddler Mike Bryant, made his living framing houses and has dealt with intense pain and debilitating issues related to his work: Mike has undergone numerous surgeries to address issues that his job created. Nevertheless, he keeps fiddling brilliantly, adapting to new limitations as his fingers work against him. My mentor of fifteen years, ninety-six-year-old Kentucky fiddler Clyde Davenport, has often told me that because one of his primary childhood musical inspirations—fiddler and early recording artist Leonard Rutherford—never worked a day in his life, Rutherford fiddled as smoothly and swimmingly as you could imagine. “Smooth and pretty, pretty and smooth,” Clyde would tell me as he guided me towards Rutherford’s sublimely glassy bowing. He’d exhort me to keep a light grip on my bow, “Don’t cut the fiddle in two.” If Leonard Rutherford’s hands had been work worn, his slippery slides might not have been so slick, his buttery bowing might have been a bit more gravelly. Over my fifteen years visiting and studying with Davenport, he has reminded me that he has always worked, working on his father’s farm, fighting in WWII, working in the automotive industry in Indiana, and keeping a large garden plot. A severe cut on his right hand impacted his banjo playing. He understands the way the body shapes music making. As far as fiddlers like Clyde Davenport and Bill Hensley are concerned, bodies that work sound different from bodies that don’t.

These concerns over how labor shapes a musician’s body are heightened in places where this musical form, associated with rural, working class people, has become institutionalized. When I taught Old-Time fiddle and banjo

recorded performances allow contemporary experts to sense, relish, and perform bad notes as good, old intonation. Conversations with contemporary fiddlers reveal that successful performances of microtonal offness rely on subtle fingerwork, especially miniscule shifts in finger position. They are distinct from bad intonation; in fact, they rely on a finely tuned ear and alternative sense of intonation based in old recordings. These connoisseur players articulate rules about bad notes that suggest patterns that they hear in older recordings. They narrate a stylistic break in the music between *now* and *then*: as they tell it, it's almost always the "Old fiddlers" who are performing these forms of expressive intonation. They associate bad notes with oldness—older ways of playing, older tunes, and older aesthetics. As players hash out the particulars of offness, they construct genealogies of intonation and pitch, linking certain intonational tendencies to particular old, dead masters—Tommy Jarrell, John Salyer, Edden Hammons, Bill Stepp. Then, in performances of offness, they locate themselves in these

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in East Tennessee State University's Bluegrass, Old-Time, and Country Music Studies Program, some faculty members voiced anxiety about the disconnect between the imagined bodies of source musicians, hardened by manual labor, and the soft bodies of college students. East Tennessean Ed Snodderly, a songwriter and owner of the famous Johnson City, Tennessee, listening room, the Down Home, would stand up in faculty meetings and ponder whether students could fully understand or play the region's music if they had never gotten "dirt under their fingernails." His concern the kinds of questions that crop up as programs bring these place- and people-rooted musics into large institutions. In some ways, they are updated versions version of revival era discussions of authenticity (Allen 2010). Questions about authenticity haunt these sorts of programs. Snodderly's concern moves us from the insider understanding of Hensley and Davenport towards a pedagogical concern in an institutional setting. Whatever the case, Hensley's acknowledgement of the impact of work on his fingers, Davenport's memory of Leonard Rutherford's loose body and bluesy playing, and Snodderly's concern with dirt under fingernails suggest the ways that concerns over the body come into play among musical insiders and outsiders as they grapple with the genre.

Beyond institutions, contemporary experts like Shay Garriock pose similar questions the impact of manual labor on music making. Shay, who tipped me off to the bad notes, believes that rural lifeways shaped the sound of source recordings. He explains, "So I guess that goes into saying that I feel like lifestyle and life experiences and philosophy of life, religion, politics, culture—all that stuff influences how the music sounds." For Shay, the differences of "lifestyle and life experiences" are audible in recordings of source musicians. Expert Old-time fiddlers—past and present—show an awareness for the body's role in music making. From this angle, bad notes might serve as a way of recognizing and recalling the laboring bodies of earlier performers. In the contemporary moment, it allows expert players to sound out their affinity for the older, less sweetened sounds and ways of playing, whether or not these sounds have been shaped by a laboring body.

intonational genealogies. Through a performance of offness, they display their deep engagement with oldness.

This engagement with offness in old recordings demands that players learn develop a deep understanding of genre's canon and specific articulations of offness. Contemporary Midwestern fiddler Dan Gellert, who is recognized as one of the funkiest players on the Old-time scene, addresses the particulars of offness, also revealing the ambiguities that unfold as fiddlers tangle with these ambiguous notes:

The thing is not just flattening thirds and sevenths and sharpening fourths and stuff, which tend to be the things that happen. But it's like just how much and where? And to use . . . using . . . using little expressive, little intonation expressions like where you take a note and just push it a little. You maybe slide into it and push a little past it. And it gives it a little emphasis. . . . Most all of the Old-Timers had certain intonations that really were part of their sound. (Gellert 2001)

Intonational tendencies transform into sonic calling cards. Tennessee fiddler Mike Bryant, during a fiddle lesson in 2008, explained the fundamentals to me, demonstrating the subtle left hand shifts: "In A, it's usually just a little bit flat with the old fiddlers. And then the F# on your E string—just a tad [flat]. Probably almost always that seventh is quite a bit flat. But I think Tommy [Jarrell] actually sharpened his sometimes. . . . When you're in G, on that D string instead of hitting that F#, you'll be a little flat of that. And it's just certain tunes too" (Bryant 2008). Each rule invites an exception, revealing the depth of listening and mastery of the recorded canon that this form of connoisseurship demands of its participants. Bryant drew my attention to a 1937 Alan Lomax field recording of Kentucky fiddler Bill Stepp playing "Rebel's Raid." In the second half of the tune, Stepp plays a microtonal note just flat of F#: in the midst of masterful, jubilant performance, it shimmers with a melancholic dissonance. During our lesson, I couldn't pull it off convincingly: it's a subtle thing that requires sustained attention and work.

Even as expert players identify key moments of expressive intonation and call like-minded musicians' attention to them, there's no consensus or clearinghouse for this kind of information. Open to careful interpretation, it is a thing to be discussed, mulled over, and debated when experts make music together or talk about the music they make. It is a matter of hearing acuity and taste that ultimately underscores the diversity of approaches to fiddling that were documented in the American South during the 20th century. While some consultants hear flattened notes, others hear sharpened notes. When I visited with Pittsboro, North Carolina, fiddler Kenny Jackson, who maintained a blog about fiddling called "The Wild Note" and is a devout adherent of offness, he told me he hears a tendency to sharpen rather than flatten notes in the old stuff:

I think having listened to a lot of the old—the really old-fashioned stuff—the really kind of archaic music, there was a lot of that. . . . There's microtonal differences, like where something is pushed to just very slightly sharp. A lot of times, it's that slight sharpness that you hear in there. But there's also like the way the notes are articulated in the language of that really old style. . . . They have that same kind of thing in there. They may put it in different places, but I think it's something that's been around a long time. And it got ironed out as we got into the twentieth century, and, I think, as a lot of people have pointed out, as harmonic instruments came into it—guitar, piano in some cases. Fiddle notes got smoothed out. (Jackson 2014)

When players like Kenny Jackson imagine what the old stuff sounded like and how it sounded before recording technologies were documenting it, they speculate about how fretted instruments like the guitar or fretted banjos, with their strict tonal certainty, changed the music as they became mass produced and widely available through mail-order catalogs in the early 20th century.

### **Interrogating the Bad Note**

*Shay Garriock's Violin Shop  
Pittsboro, North Carolina  
October 23, 2014*

After Shay plays his "Forked Deer," I ask him to tell me about the bad notes.

With fiddle in hand, he explains, “so this tune, when it goes to that second finger on the A: the C#. Well, I think a lot of Old-timers, probably not intentionally, but a part of a style is they slightly flatten that note. And they not only flattened it, but they grace noted into it and drug it with the bow. So it’s got a drag to it. So it’s kind of like . . .”

He plays the ascending phrase from the open A string to a *bad* note just below C# and above C natural. Just like banjo player Jack Reedy’s “Cluck Old Hen,” it’s an ambiguous third. In the old recordings, this interval is a hotbed of expressivity.

“So it’s not natural, and it’s not a sharp. It’s somewhere in between.” He raises his right hand, holds his pointer finger and thumb an inch apart. I imagine this note—the elusive third, falling somewhere in the space between his finger and thumb. “And I don’t think it’s intentional, but it may be. It gives it a different sound.” He purses his right hand with his fingers and thumb meeting as if grasping the difference in tone or suggesting something exquisite. “It gives it a sound that’s kind of a—maybe a little dark texture to it, or dark flavor that maybe some people did intentionally and it was just copied. It could be just that people didn’t get to the note quite right.”

I ask, “But why would they do that? Was it done consistently in the recordings?”

“Consistently? I think it was done not by just one fiddler, but lots of fiddlers,” he answers before listing other players. “Hick did it. Joe Birchfield of the Hilltoppers did it a lot. Hobart Smith. Bunches. Bunches of fiddlers did it. Can’t even think of them all. I’d have to listen to the recordings and say, ‘Oh yeah, there it is.’ Even West Virginia and Kentucky fiddlers did it.” The note, first described as a mistake or the result of technical inability, transforms into something heard on old recordings, scrutinized, and replicated—a matter of



“style.” Names and place are invoked. A stylistic and tonal genealogy emerges, aligning Shay with past performance practices.

I ask him if he does it on purpose, and he answers, “I *do* do it on purpose. I like it.”

“Why do you like it?”

“Because I’m trying to emulate that source material—the old guys who are dead and gone. I’m trying to make it sound like them. That’s the main reason. But after a while, you do it so much, it becomes part of your style and you don’t think about it. It just happens. So like I didn’t learn this tune directly from any fiddler. But it just came. It just got in there just from the habit.”

Emulation cultivates bodily habits. For Shay, the choice to incorporate the bad note is one part of his broader project of emulation that seeks to make certain sounds and motions part of bodily habit; it sounds out an aesthetic sensibility shaped by old recordings and the cultivation of a connoisseurship of dissonance. The mimetic effort of emulation reconfigures his musical sensibility and the habits of his body: *the note just got in there from habit*. Over a lifetime of intense, creative listening, Shay has incorporated these old recordings into motions that, when taken as a whole, become his own style. His finely tuned ear and the precise, habitual motions of his fingers enable his performance of offness. It’s only possible because he has thoroughly incorporated these old performances into his bodily practice of making music. A bad note is one sonic tool that he can deploy to signal his expert skills as a listener and player to others Old-time musicians who are invested in old recordings. He can, through his well-executed bad note, locate himself in a lineage of expressive intonation that draws on the intonational habits of canonical players.

This kind of fiddling is what anthropologist Paul Connerton calls an “incorporating practice”—an act of “habitual skilled remembering” that reveals “an incorporated sense of places and distances and pressures” (Connerton 1989: 72). The microtonal bad note is indeed a matter of reconfiguring senses of place, distance, and pressure around an older body of recordings. Bad notes and the aesthetic of offness becomes “sedimented” in Shay’s body through habitual motion (Connerton 1989: 72). Memories of motion, constructed from the sounds of old recordings, shape the ways contemporary Old-time fiddlers move their bodies and place their fingers. As he emulates, these older sounds and remembered or imagined motions sediment in Shay.

These performances of dissonance have the potential to resonate in other players. As a player and student of this music, I feel the delightful dissonance in Shay’s *bad* note. I have been taught to hear and feel these sorts of notes. What once sounded dissonant and inscrutable, now sounds right.<sup>24</sup> Along the way, mentors have pointed these sorts of sounds out and helped me to appreciate them. The note distinguishes Shay’s rendering of “Forked Deer” from the multitude of other versions. Some listeners will hear his bad note as out of tune. Shay, however, likes it because it recalls the players he admires and knew in a way that the mere replication of repertoire cannot: it allows him to slip out of the present and align himself with the past. The bad note conjures the memory of older players, reveals Shay’s commitment to older sounds, and invites listeners in-the-know to feel the refined, subtle pleasure of the connoisseur.

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<sup>24</sup> I distinctly remember the moment in high school when the power of microtonal dissonance in Old-time hit me. I was on the way to school, listening to a recording of Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham’s profoundly dissonant performance of the Primitive Baptist hymn, “When Sorrows Encompass Me Round.” Before this moment, Jarrell’s fiddling and Cockerham’s fretless banjo playing had often sounded out of tune. My older brother would make fun of it because it sounded awful to him. All of the sudden, in the midst of my daily high school hustle, goose bumps rose on my arms. Something in the music hit me in a way that it had never hit me before. It was visceral. The tension created by the discrepancy between where the banjo player and the fiddler were finding their notes blew me away. The gaps pulled me out of my daily routine and in to some deeply emotional musical center.

## **Conclusion: “Like Ketchup on a Taco”**

In July of 2012, I found myself at the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend, WA. It’s a delightful week of music, dancing, and hanging out on a beautiful old early 1900s naval base nestled along the Puget Sound. Started in 1977, the festival has made a point of hiring the older masters. This commitment has gotten trickier over time. This particular year, I was supposed to accompany Charlie McCarroll, who fit the bill for the event. In his 70s, Charlie is one of the few older Old-time players who grew up in the music remaining in East Tennessee; his father, Jimmy McCarroll, was a famous fiddler in the region and recorded for Columbia Records in 1928 and 1929. A few months before we were supposed to go, Charlie bailed on the trip, but the festival directors decided that I should come out and represent East Tennessee fiddling anyway. It was a tall order.

After spending the mornings working through deep repertoire sessions, I was responsible for leading an afternoon band lab—a time when musician participants could come and learn a tune or two from my repertoire on fiddles, banjos, guitars, or whatever other instruments they might have. At the end of the week, all the band labs—Cajun, Quebecois, Métis, New England, Old-time, Irish, Basque—would gather in a cozy auditorium and perform the pieces they had worked up for each other. They would perform a piece without any assistance from the teachers. In a beautiful, light-filled, old wooden building overlooking the parade ground and the water, twenty or so students and I prepared for this concert, working our way through a peculiar tune that I had learned from Charlie McCarroll a few years before. “New Nashville” was one of Charlie’s uncle George’s tunes, and although it’s related to some versions of “Give the Fiddler a Dram,” I haven’t encountered anything quite like it. Set in the key of G, it has an ambiguous

seventh that lives somewhere on the D string between the F# and the F note. It seemed like a fun, challenging tune to share with the participants.

At most fiddle camps and workshops, students spend an hour or two meeting with their teachers each day over the 5- or 6-day camp. In these spaces, instructors employ a wide range of pedagogical techniques—group listening exercises, tablature/sheet music, bowing patterns translated into clever mnemonic devices, call-and-response learning in which the teacher plays a phrase and invites students to play it back. I tend to employ the call-and-response method because it aligns more closely with my experiences learning from older masters. I supplement it with critical listening exercises and careful analysis of the subtleties in the music. I spent the week trying to get the fiddlers to hear where this peculiar note fell, but most of their ring fingers kept landing on the F natural, a smidge flat of where Charlie finds the note. The effect of this flattening was that the tune lost its edge. Subtlety was lost and drama reigned: instead of feeling tense and dissonant, the note felt resolved and obvious. These subtle shifts, I came to realize, take work and assiduous listening. They're unlikely to be mastered in a week of fiddle camp.

Meanwhile my bandmate and guitar player Karen Celia Heil challenged the guitarists to find a way to accompany the tune that would emphasize the dissonance and not resolve the tune's tension. Many were stumped. In the jam sessions in which they usually participated, they were accustomed to playing the 7 chord (an F) when they encountered these sorts of melodic moments. This accompaniment choice would resolve (or obscure) whatever ambiguity the fiddle introduced with its bad note. However, rather than creating a sense of resolution and choosing the more modern sounding F chord, which a *festival style* guitarist would likely use, Karen instructed students with guitars to play a D chord, which aligned with the kinds of accompaniment choices often heard on older recordings. After some resistance and confusion,

she won them over to this more dissonant choice. Then she showed them how she added an F note by reaching her thumb over the neck to fret the low E string. Through this extraordinarily athletic move, she introduced an ambiguously funky harmonic tension into the tune's accompaniment. Even with the fiddlers hunting for their note, the guitarists' D created a sense of edgy tension and funky dissonance. On Friday, we watched our band lab get on stage and let loose on the tune in honor of Charlie.

Afterwards the class shuffled off the stage, out of the auditorium, and gathered on the sunny lawn outside the theater, feeling a sense of accomplishment and breathing sighs of relief. Things had gone pretty well. A few of the fiddlers had captured the ambiguity. But the guitarists had delivered with their D chord, creating thick tension. As we stood there, Dan Gellert, another faculty fiddler rushed over to our group and declared that *that was the right sound*. The D chord was perfect in his ears. Among the many things for which Dan Gellert is known, his embrace and masterful performance of the older kinds of dissonance in the music is his calling card. Rooted in his deep, lifelong study of old recordings, Dan's fiddle and banjo performances engage with the music's funkier side through creative and expressive intonation and rhythms. To have played an F chord, he insisted, would have been tasteless—"like putting ketchup on a taco." It would have shown bad taste.

Dan Gellert is a connoisseur of offness and oldness. As Dan tells it, he has cultivated a taste for "some rough dissonances between accompaniment and melody" that he hears in older recordings (Gellert 2001). This preference explains his reaction to our dissonant chordal choice. He believes that an avoidance of the seventh chord and minor chords are key tenets of the pre-World War II, rural accompaniment aesthetic that guides his playing. A resistance to chordal resolution and delight in ambiguity play crucial roles in the offness of accompaniment. It is a

point of departure and distinction from some contemporary playing practices that seek lush, resolved sounds. Gellert describes the way that Virginia fiddler Emmet Lundy's "Lost Girl"—a tune in the key of G— moves into a melodic section that calls for an E minor chord. However, Lundy's guitar player hits an E major chord, creating an unresolved dissonance that Gellert declares to be "just tasty as can be" (Gellert 2001). Expert listeners and players like him consume and savor dissonance. He recounts and relishes the jarring experience of a dissonant E major chord: "And it just goes *neeeeow*. I just love it. I think it's like eating jalapeño peppers. *Neeeeow*. Isn't that nice?" (2001). Drawing on his deep knowledge and memory of Lundy's canonic, archival recording, Gellert narrates the recorded performance and savors the chord change and the feeling it creates.

Like the connoisseur who knows through consumption, Gellert's speech points towards acts of consumption—the imagined burn of a jalapeño and the devouring of a recording. He equates dissonance with the sensorially rich (and potentially painful) experience of eating jalapeño peppers. The sensory experience bleeds between hearing and taste, suggesting that the connoisseurship of offness draws on the sensorium. My work with fiddlers and experience as a fiddler reveal that talk about particular moments and musical choices, documented on older recordings, play a key role in the experience of offness as on-ness. Talk about old recordings creates spaces in which the aesthetic can be articulated and shaped. The ability to recall and rehash key performances from the canon of recordings results in shared pleasure and a deeper knowledge of how offness works. Older recordings and the contemporary choices they inspire serve as the material which these players consume and savor.

Shared preference for offness—bad notes and dissonance—shape social interactions and choices about who can play with whom. Our little expression of offness in our fiddle class in

Port Townsend captured Dan Gellert's ear. In the broader scene, personal preferences for microtonal and chordal dissonance repel players who don't have an appreciation for it while attracting those that do. Some players will hear Shay's bad note as being out of tune, while others, steeped in older recordings, will hear it as good intonation. Players who are hip to these old recordings and the funkiness therein incorporate these sounds into their playing and make musical decisions—a chord choice, a double stop, a melodic phrase—that resonate with fellow connoisseurs of offness. When fiddlers employ a bad note properly, they embrace aesthetics that they believe to be older, position themselves in a lineage of expressive intonation, and push back against the blandness they hear in many contemporary renderings of Old-time. In the end, bad notes and offness are expressions of good taste coming from like-minded musicians who can't conceive of being so tasteless and ignorant that they would "put ketchup on a taco."

## CHAPTER 6

### SO LIVE IT BLEEDS: MUSIC MEDIATED AS INTIMATE AND LIVE IN CONTEMPORARY OLD-TIME

#### Introduction

The production and sale of albums are a vital part of the contemporary Old-time music scene. Old-time listeners, who also tend to be musicians, still buy albums, ranging from DIY affairs (burned off of laptops and delivered in a folded brown paper bag with rustic woodblock prints), to elaborate, crowdfunded studio productions (packaged in lavish, artful packaging with erudite booklets of liner notes). Listener/players read liner notes. They learn recently unearthed or reimagined tunes (or hunt down the source recordings) from new albums and incorporate them into their repertoire and into their local scenes. The tunes that expert players record trickle over time from their exclusive small sessions down to the larger, profoundly participatory jams of less skilled players.<sup>1</sup>

Album release parties are a regular feature of summer fiddlers' conventions. At the massive Clifftop festival, where several thousand Old-time musicians from around the world

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<sup>1</sup> Elite players tend to play in smaller sessions at festivals. These sessions are not open to players who are not invited. Social capital accrues to participants in these sessions. Ranging in size from roughly three to eight players, these sessions tend to be small. It's rare to find an expert session with more than 3 fiddles. Two banjos are acceptable but less common, unless the two banjoists play different styles (e.g., clawhammer and a chord-based fingerstyle). These sessions often attract audiences that gather along their edges, standing just over the shoulders of the players. Listeners regularly record audio or video on digital recorders or phones; in fact, this is so common that listeners rarely ask for permission. Occasionally, expert players will play in larger sessions, but this is usually for the sake of the party. In some areas, like parts of Eastern Kentucky and Southwest Virginia, it is much more common to find expert players playing in larger, more raucous sessions. As for players who have less skill, a "small" session might mean ten players. Beginner and intermediate sessions can involve as many as fifteen to twenty players, often arranged in a large circle. The number of fiddles or banjos is not of much concern. Some sessions are organized explicitly for beginners, playing tunes at accessible tempos, and are open to anyone who shows up; others exhibit slightly more exclusivity.



gather on a mountain to camp, play tunes, and catch up for a week in early August, clever, homemade, release-party flyers cover the walls outside the bathroom, offering a delightfully quirky visual experience (one in contrast to the singularly unpleasant olfactory situation created by the thousands of people in attendance). At these release parties, players set up in a campsite along a main road and play through the material on their album, while listeners crowd around, leaving a little space in the middle for the band to sit or stand. There is no amplification. Somebody is invariably mixing free drinks with cheap liquor. Bands interact with their sizable, slightly tipsy audience. Attendees film and record the performance, clap, gently heckle, eat some snacks, have a drink, buy an album or two, and after an hour or so drift off to strike up their own sessions at campsites scattered through the woods. For decades, buying albums of Old-time music—this “odd mixture of ritual consumption and homage to friendship”—has played out at festivals, camps, and music gatherings (Bealle 2005: 247). Purchasing a physical album—an LP in the 70s, a cassette in the 80s and early 90s, and a CD in the late 90s and 2000s—marks social bonds in the scene and recalls the intimacy of relationships formed around this seemingly old but eminently present music. New albums of old music are vital sources of repertoire, inspiration, and style, even as most musicians imagine Old-time to be less-mediated.

Unlike Bluegrass and other related genres where flawless performances and pristine sonics often define albums, contemporary Old-time albums value liveness over perfection. The concept of liveness in relation to music has received critical attention in recent years, and its meanings have proliferated (see, e.g., Ake 2010, Auslander 2008, 2012; Porcello 2005, Sanden 2013). Louise Meintjes’ understanding of liveness, drawn from her work in South African recording studios, guides my approach here. Meintjes writes, “Liveness is an illusion of sounding live that is constructed through technological intervention in the studio and mediated

symbolically through discourses about the natural and the artistic” (2003: 112). To sound authentically Old-time (or Appalachian, as in the case of Tony Thomas and other East Tennessee musicians) is to sound live.<sup>2</sup> Because most Old-time album consumers are also players, they want to hear recordings that reflect their own experiences with the music; therefore, they favor recordings that seem to capture musicians making music together in the same space at the same time.<sup>3</sup> An album’s perceived liveness (or lack of liveness) plays a significant role in its reception: the more live the better. Recordings that lack liveness are considered lackluster.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that the ideals of (and desire for) intimate, face-to-face music sessions lead Old-time players to create recordings that sound both *live* and *close*. Both players and listeners seek close-sounding recordings with minimal reverb that put them in the thick of a session and reflect the forms of intimate music making and sociality that make the music meaningful. To do this, I explore the aesthetics and processes shaping recordings at Joe DeJarnette’s Studio 808a—a state-of-the-art studio in Virginia’s Blue Ridge—and in Tony Thomas’s album of field recordings, recorded in a parlor in East Tennessee.

One of the busiest engineers in the genre and a fixture in the scene, Joe DeJarnette is an expert at recording musicians live and creating close mixes that give listeners access to an

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<sup>2</sup> While studies of Old-time have explored the Luddite tendencies and countercultural politics at play in the music (Allen 2010, Bealle 2005), I call attention to technological interventions that shape the music, and highlight the ways that they make these sorts of social and cultural positions audible.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Porcello describes the kind of process that shapes most contemporary recording projects—a multitrack procedure “in which each instrument and voice is recorded on its own track—often outside the context of real-time ensemble performance—[that] enables sound engineers to obtain fine-grained control over the placement and balance of instruments in a musical mix, a process essential to achieving the contemporary sound of popular music. Thus, a well-mixed record is usually one that is recorded in a way that devalues, and often outright discourages, live performance in the studio” (Porcello 2005:106). The recording processes that I describe in this chapter privilege live performance over the kind of “fine grained control” that this multitrack process allows.

<sup>4</sup> I should note that some performers prefer to make their recordings using the process that Thomas Porcello describes above. For example, David Bass, the fiddler for the popular band The Freight Hoppers, tells me that he is a firm believer laying down one track at a time. The control over sound and performances outweighs a sense of liveness.

acoustically ideal position—a seat in the best sessions. East Tennessean Tony Thomas, in contrast, makes his music and field recordings on the edge of the mainstream Old-time scene with minimal equipment. Tony plays a critical role in his local music community as a performer and documenter, and his field recordings give listeners sonic access to the liveness of a private living room jam session among friends.

Although the audiences and sonics of Joe’s and Tony’s recordings differ drastically, both make recordings that suggest immediacy and liveness, working in a genre with histories of liveness. They create intimate and profoundly live-sounding recordings in different ways that reveal different values. Other researchers have explored the ways that sound engineers, producers, and musicians signify close sociality through sounding live in the studio (Meintjes 2003, Porcello 2005). My examination of Studio 808a adds to this earlier work as I describe the way that *bleed*—a sonic artifact that comes from a recording session in which participants sit *too close* to one another, and a microphone intended to pick up source x also picks up a bit of sound from source y, and maybe a tiny bit from source z —comes to index the liveness and sociality of an intimate moment of music in the studio. Bleed reminds player/listeners of their experiences playing and hearing music up-close at summer festivals, in a space defined by overlapping sounds and in sessions that sonically bleed into each other. Finessing bleed, Joe transforms sounds that most engineers hear as a liability into an asset. He works with bleed to give listeners a sense of what the session sounded like in the room, signifying intimate music making that his listeners recognize and feel. Bleed becomes as sign of life in Studio 808a and in the ears of listeners.

In the second section, I cross the Blue Ridge, pass through the undulating ridges of the Tennessee River Valley, and bump up against the sandstone bluffs of Tennessee's Cumberland

Plateau, where Tony Thomas records and sells albums of field recordings that feature him playing with his friends. Tony's albums offer another take on the relationship between sounding live, sonic closeness, and intimate music making in Old-time—one that's tied to musical skills valued in East Tennessee (i.e., to nail a performance in front of an audience or in a first-take), to the performed liveness of early commercial Old-time recordings (particularly through the use of skits and speech), and to histories of field recordings (their production, circulation, and consumption in the region and the genre). Brimming with sonic signs of life, Tony's field recordings double down on liveness. First, they bring listeners into deeply private spaces and socially intimate moments of live, informal music making—in the case I'll examine, it is the liveness of a jam session in his friend Jack Sandifer's living room with septuagenarian fiddler Charlie McCarroll, whose father recorded for Columbia in the 1920s. Tony then reproduces this liveness through the minimally processed sonics of his field recordings, the sounds of old technologies, and the decision to include the extra-musical sounds of bodies making music (see Meintjes 2003, Ake 2010).

But what does it mean to sound live? And what, in particular, does it mean to sound live in Old-time? As engineers and expert musicians attempt to capture an Old-time sound, they negotiate what liveness means on a given recording, why it matters, and how to signify it through sound technologies.<sup>5</sup> I trace the processes through which contemporary Old-time musicians create close, intimate recorded sounds—a form of liveness that references their listener/player's experiences with close, intimate music making in jam sessions and at outdoor fiddlers' conventions. For many Old-time musicians, face-to-face music making is a sacred experience, and a recording that suggests something other than that mode of musicking is suspect at best, and

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<sup>5</sup> The kinds of recordings that I write about could also be considered within Tom Turino's field of "high fidelity music," referring to "musical sound heard on recordings that index or are iconic of live performance" (2008:67).

ethically compromised at worst. In Old-time, especially among expert listener/players liveness is a form of on-ness that references meaningful, lived experiences with the music.

## **A Brief History of Recording Live and Field Recording in Old-time**

### **The 1920s Golden Era**

As Old-time became a commercial genre in the 1920s, the technology of the era dictated that musicians record live in the same space at the same time. Consider these two descriptions of 1920s recording sessions from two Chattanoogaans, guitarist Alvin Young, who played guitar with his fiddling uncle Jess Young, and fiddler Bob Douglas. Chattanooga Alvin Young described the experience of recording with his uncle Jess Young at Gennett in late April of 1925:

Miss Walton got us the engagement with the Starr Piano Company; we paid our own expenses. We went up to Richmond, Indiana. We didn't have to audition before we went up; we played one piece up there in Richmond. They carried us all through their big plant that day and the next day we went and recorded some. There were these big machines, and the man that run them hid in another room, and it had a green and a red light on it, under this little microphone. When the green went on, you started; with the red, you stopped. (Wolfe 1981: 52)

Young's descriptions of an unfussy red light/green light recording session squares with the Gennett label's aesthetic: rather than hiring specialist recording engineers, the label typically tapped employees from their piano factory who "did not have the know-how to interfere with old-time musicians' arrangements or playing in order to make the records more accessible to mainstream listeners" (Kennedy 2012: 176). The best moments of unfussy liveness that played out in between the green and red lights would make their way onto shellac discs and out into the listening world.

Fiddler Bob Douglas described a fussier recording session with Victor in October of 1928. He was accompanying the Allen Brothers, a Chattanooga-based tenor banjo, kazoo, and guitar duo that specialized in rags and bluesy numbers (and found themselves in a dispute with a

record company after the label released their music as a “race” record) (Wolfe 1977: 50).

Douglas recalls fascinatingly crude acoustic engineering and the travails of some 1920s’

recording sessions:

Now we had a pretty good band, and so we got down there to what they call Five Points in Atlanta. Right across the road from Five Points in an old brick building they had their recording studio up there. So we went up there and we got all set up and was fixing to record, and you should have seen them recording studios back then. They had a lot of old quilts and sacks up on the windows and around the wall. Tow sacks and quilts to make it soundproof, you see. While he [the recording engineer] was setting up he come over there and he would stop us and go back and take a tow sack or something of the window and he finally got his sound like we wanted it. And after he got it up we started to playing a tune and, and after we got it recorded, why the operator, he stopped us and he said, “Listen to this.” And we listened to it, you know, and it had train bells a-ringin’ in it.

Come to find out the railroad yards, the switch yards was right in the back of this building see. They had those old steam engines, you know. And you know how they used to ring them bells, when they were switching back and forth. (Fulcher 2008: 16)

Eventually, after a week biding their time in Atlanta, Douglas and crew made it back to a new, quieter studio space on Peachtree Avenue, where “they had it all set up just like they did before, with quilts hanging around the walls and sacks over the window” and, narrowly avoiding Jimmie Rodgers bumping them from their session, they made their recording live—all together at the same time (Fulcher 2008: 16). In the experiences of these early Old-time recording artists, we see the informality of the sessions, the environmental bleed and noisy sonics (e.g., trains and bells), and the seat-of-the-pants production quality that marked many commercial recording session in the 1920s. Liveness ruled the day.

### **The 1970s Revival**

Besides these sorts of live recording sessions during the so-called “Golden Era” of Old-time during the 1920s and early 30s, a second tradition of recording Old-time live took shape in the 1970s’ revival, at a time when recording technologies would have allowed for overdubbing.

Two foundational revival era bands, the Fuzzy Mountain String Band and the Highwoods String

Band, recorded their first albums live. The two bands represent what folklorist Ray Allen describes as the “two distinct, though occasionally overlapping, strands of the old-time music revival”—“the fiddle-driven jam session bands” (i.e., the Fuzzy Mountain String Band) and “the repertoire stage string bands” (i.e., the Highwoods String Band) (Allen 2010: 204). In many ways, these bands established contours for albums and performances that continue to this day. But more importantly to our topic, their attitudes towards the actual recording processes and recording technologies resonate into the present. From the time of the revival in the early 1970s, some Old-time bands have avoided recording studios, opting to make records in ways that align with their experiences jamming in more intimate settings.

First consider the fiddle-driven jam session band, the Durham/Chapel Hill, North Carolina-based Fuzzy Mountain String Band, who played music that was “strictly instrumental for informal home, dance, and festival gatherings,” gleaned from visits with older master players and field tapes documenting those visits. Fiddler Bill Hicks recalls their 1971 recording session, relishing in the band’s Luddite tendencies: “In the fall of 1971, we recorded our first LP, *The Fuzzy Mountain String Band* (Rounder 0010). We set up a two-track tape recorder in either Bobbie or Eric’s living room. Using several Rube Goldberg adaptations, we patched our shared microphones (some were only one step removed from tin cans with strings) into the recorder. There was no mixing board, and all takes were live. We were pretty sure a ‘punch in’ was what you did when you lost your church key” (Hicks 1995b). A “punch in” is a common practice in multi-track recording, in which players can go back and correct a flub by “punching in” to their track and rerecording the problem section. Crude sound technology and live recording were key to the story and sound of the Fuzzy Mountain String Band’s canonic revival-era recording that still shapes jam repertoires and approaches to playing ensemble string band music.

Second, the Ithaca, NY based Highwoods String Band—what Ray Allen would consider a repertoire stage band—(literally) foregrounded the fact that they made their recording outside and live on their album “Fire on the Mountain,” by placing a photograph of the band playing with their outdoor recording rig on their album cover. They stand in a field, circled around two stereo microphones that dangle off of a stand. Unlike the fiddle tune-centric approach of their contemporaries, the Fuzzies, Highwoods recorded and “played a broader range of material including songs, for more formal performance situations” (Allen 2010: 204). The notes on the album give a sense of the band’s approach to making music and recording. Their relationships to the larger scene guided the recording process:

We learned this music from many sources—musicians young and old all over the country; old 78’s and tape collections; the audiences we have played for at street corners, concert halls, coffee houses and fiddlers conventions; and mostly from each other. Though we have learned this music with a great respect for its sources in the past, we play it because it is right on time for us in the present. City life and city music are failing us. A good laugh, a good tune, and a good time are what we need to get through these crazy times. If the music on this record can spread a little of those things around, the pleasure is all ours.

The music on this record was recorded in September 1972 after a summer travelling and playing at festivals and fiddlers’ conventions. Most of the tunes were recorded out of door, where we feel the most comfortable, and if you listen you can hear the crickets. (The Highwoods Stringband 1973)

The band’s subsequent albums were recorded in guitar player Doug Dorschug’s “specially outfitted chicken barn” (Allen 2010: 202). The cover photograph and narrative about recording outdoors minimizes the role of audio equipment, lending the whole recording process an organic quality. Just as the Fuzzies album influenced a generation of players, the Highwoods’ wild and joyous approach to Old-time spawned copycat bands and the quest for frolicsome and groovy



string band music.<sup>6</sup> Brimming with liveness, the recordings of both groups also highlighted the intimate kinds of sociality that shaped band members' music making, tune learning, and festival-going.

Besides these celebrations of liveness in foundational revival albums, there are other ways that sounding live has become a defining tradition in recording and consumption in the Old-time scene. As long as there have been consumer-grade recording technologies, Old-time players have made "field recordings" of jam session at festivals, gatherings, and at home.<sup>7</sup> Key revival-era record labels Rounder Records and Country Records regularly included field recordings alongside their studio produced releases, cultivating a taste for the particular kind of liveness that field recordings signify. Beyond the circulation of field recorded albums, the cassette tape also contributed to the taste for liveness among Old-time musicians. Just as Bob Cantwell (1996) notes that the LP, with its increased capacity, helped fuel the broader folk revival, cassette tapes (and highly portable tape recorders) helped drive the Old-time revival of the 1970s and 1980s, allowing the music to circulate through a robust tape trading culture, and fostering a culture of field recording jam sessions at festivals. Cassettes spread moments of liveness around. Folklorist John Bealle describes the rise of the cassette tape:

In the 1970s, before studio recordings were released exclusively on cassette, cassette technology was developing its own aura as a vernacular medium. Aspiring old time musicians used portable cassette recorders to tape jam sessions, concerts, and older-generation fiddlers. At festivals, it was even possible to see microphones, sometimes attached to long poles, penetrate the center of a popular jam session. Some musicians loathed this intrusion, but cassette technology seemed perfectly designed to articulate the

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<sup>6</sup> Even outside of the reach of the mainstream Old-time revival scene, in mid-1990s Chattanooga, CD reissues of these two almost quarter-century-old albums drifted into my musical world and provided me with tunes to learn while liner notes tipped me off about old sources recordings.

<sup>7</sup> For example, my first mentor, Charlie Acuff (1920-2013), used a consumer-grade recorder and discs to record music making at his house during the 1940s. He also recorded performances off of the radio. Later during the cassette era, he made cassettes. I received cassette tapes from him in 2001 and 2002.

widespread view that this was the people's music. And surely everyone in the revival, at one time or another, had been at both ends of the microphone. (Bealle 2005: 245)

These cassettes were filled with signs of life. And, according to Bealle, it was a liveness that rooted itself in firsthand encounters and relationships. He likens “the car tape box” to “a catalog of personal experience,” and continues, “Sharing a ride to festival or dance weekend, one might inquire about a tape crudely labeled ‘Glenville ‘82’ and get a firsthand account of an unusually good jam session” (Bealle 2005: 249). These recordings index affectively potent moments of face-to-face music-making—elusive moments of musical transcendence and social intimacy.<sup>8</sup> The affective experience of being there and participating, witnessing, or, perhaps, recording a supremely groovy session draws people back to festivals year after year. I have stayed with two different revival generation Old-time musicians—one in Harriman, New York, and the other in Oakland, California—who have custom-built shelving, running across the walls of rooms, filled with the cassette tapes they recorded of sessions and visits with older players.

Even though the cassette has largely fallen into obsolescence since the late 1990s, digital recording technologies have filled the gap. Awkward mini-disc recorders gave way to handheld digital recorders in the early 2000s. Now musicians continue to try to bottle the liveness of festivals as they gather around good festival sessions with phones and digital recorders and create digital files for learning, trading, and listening pleasure. These informal recordings of informal jams shape their sonic preferences. Recording informal sessions and more formal album material live and, in some cases, outside has become a kind of tradition among Old-time musicians.

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<sup>8</sup> These moments are like musical holy grails that expert players seek. They also motivate amateur players to improve so that they can have the experience as a player rather than a listener.



*Figure 23 (above): Recording engineer Joe DeJarnette in front of Studio 808a, Floyd, Virginia, 13 March 2018. (photograph by author)*

### **Studio 808a: Intimacy, The Outdoor Festival Sound, and Bleed as Liveness**

*Studio 808a Floyd, Virginia  
Early January 2011  
Part 1*

I'm sitting with my bandmates, Luke and Karen, and recording engineer Joe DeJarnette in the front parlor of a stately old farmhouse in Floyd, Virginia. Looking out the window, the scene is typical of this part of Virginia's Blue Ridge; just beyond a winding two-lane road, nestled against a wooded ridge, there's a cow pasture with a brook babbling through it and an old apple orchard. Inside the parlor, it's a different scene. A large mixing board filled with knobs and faders—the size of a twin bed—is situated between the windows. Joe's MacBook Pro is connected to this console, and is running Pro Tools, a digital recording software. Wearing an unbuttoned flannel shirt over a T shirt and a woolen ivy cap, Joe, who is in his early 40s, hunches

his lanky body over the laptop. He's offering possible mixes for a cut we recorded. Karen, Luke, and I sit on a black futon against the wall opposite the windows, listening to the subtle changes Joe is making to the mix as they come through speakers set to the side of the windows.

This is the control room for Studio 808a—where some fifty Old-time projects have been recorded over the last five or six years. Beyond the control room, the four-bedroom house serves as a kind of museum of audio technologies: old Victrolas and Edison Cylinder players—pieces of a collection Joe has been working on since childhood—sit in the corners of nearly every room. Old shellac is scattered among dated copies of the *New Yorker* on the furniture in the bedrooms upstairs, where clients usually stay during their recording session. Joe thinks the space helps put clients at ease; in his estimation, his old farmhouse in the mountains feels like the natural environment for this music. “Let’s make this clear—you’re not in a total vacuum here,” he tells me later, thinking about the fact that some of his recordings probably include the rumble of his neighbor’s tractor ambling through them. “You’re in a real place, with real sounds, and there’s a hominess about it . . . combined with pro-quality, you know. My house is kind of a funny juxtaposition of the old and the new, right? It’s this old farmhouse, but yet I have a state of the art digital multi-tracking system with cameras and computers and all that kind of stuff too” (Dejarnette 2018).<sup>9</sup>

Taking its name “Studio 808a” from Joe’s old 4th-floor walk-up on Bergen St. in Brooklyn’s Prospect Heights neighborhood, the studio has occupied several spaces over the last fifteen years—the apartment in Brooklyn with Reggaeton pumping from the body shop across the street during most of the 2000s, a funky attic in a dilapidated farmhouse in tiny Eggleston, Virginia, after Joe decided to leave the city in 2009, and now this rambling farmhouse purchased

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<sup>9</sup> All quotations from Joe Dejarnette in this chapter come from (Dejarnette 2018).

as a foreclosure after the real estate market tanked in 2008. Even as the location has changed, Joe has developed a reputation as an ace engineer for live recording sessions. Besides being one of the most (if not *the* most) sought-after recording engineers in the Old-time scene, he's been hired to engineer projects with more popular performers like Grammy winner Rhiannon Giddens and Lake Street Dive.

### **The “Outdoor Festival Sound” and a Sonic Blueprint**

Joe tells me that one particular project, the *Light and Hitch* album, helped establish him as a go-to recording engineer in the genre; it continues to serve as a model for his approach to recording Old-time—recording live, face-to-face, sitting close together. He tells me about the “outdoor festival sound” that he wanted to capture in that 2008 project; it's a sound rooted in the close musical encounters that happen at fiddlers' conventions, and it continues to shape his aesthetics.

The “outdoor festival sound” deserves some attention, because it reveals how sociality and sound blend at outdoor fiddlers' conventions in the contemporary Old-time scene. At these events, Old-time musicians inhabit (often for a week at a time) an outdoor world of intimate music making where sounds of sessions bleed into each other. Understood by many players as the social and musical heart of the Old-time scene, these events are densely layered sonic spaces; campsites and the sounds that emit from them overlap each other. In some cases a car or van provides a sonic buffer, while in others nothing more than a nylon tarp and twenty or so feet separate one campsite from another. Falling asleep in a tent at a festival can be a deeply disorienting experience, as your ears tune in to ten different sessions all within a hundred yard radius. The music swirls indeterminately through the night as sessions come coalesce, disperse, and reconfigure in pursuit of a transcending groove.

Meanwhile, under the individual tarps, groups of musicians gather. The low, yellow light of a lantern reveals them sitting knee to knee in a tight circle. These are cozy affairs. Between tunes, there is conversation, while the sound of other sessions pulse beyond the campsite. Snacks and booze are shared. Eventually, a tune or a song is picked and the four or five musicians hunker back down into their groove, listening intently to each other as the sessions swirling around outside fade away. Like the festival's sound, the music itself is layered. A common festival jam might involve two fiddles playing the melody while also thickening things up with complimentary drones or double stops and making dense syncopated rhythms. Then there's a banjo percolating, offering a thick rhythmic cluck underpinned by a skeletal melodic line that weaves between the fiddles. A guitar marks time with a steady bass note boom on the down beat and a percussive chuck on the backbeat. A bass marks the down beat. The sounds interlock.<sup>10</sup> Given that sessions bleed into others, players choose to play in different keys from their neighbors.<sup>11</sup> The jam attracts a group of listeners—a mix of strangers and friends. These listeners step under the tarp and lean their head close to the music. Green and red lights flash from the digital recorders that they dangle over the session to get the best recording possible. Ears tuned to the sound of festivals and the closeness of the music develop an aesthetic for recording that reflect the music and the sociality that gives rise to it.

This is what Joe is talking about when he talks about the “outdoor festival sound.” “I think there's an element of that that comes into my aesthetics as a mix engineer,” he reflects.

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<sup>10</sup> By no means is this the only sort of sound at festivals, but it is one of the more common sounds and styles of playing; its roots rest in the music that bands like Highwoods and the Fuzzies created in the 1970s, establishing what a string band is and how they make music together.

<sup>11</sup> Older musicians, who were attending festivals before electronic tuners became ubiquitous, tell me that there used to be “festival tuning”; over the course of the weekend, the pitch of instruments would incrementally rise as everybody would tune to the ambient pitches and mingle in new sessions.

“Which is that you’re close up. That you’re hearing more direct sound than you are reverberant sound. That you feel like you are standing next to or inside a session rather than observing it from afar. And there’s a sense that everyone is playing together live. You are having a close listening experience with that music session.” This intimate sonic mix defined the *Light and Hitch* project that helped put him on the map, and continues to shape his approach to recording Old-time string bands.

He tells me about making the *Light and Hitch* recording: “I was the only one in the group that had any experience in the recording studio. All of the other musicians were younger, and they were also all sort of outdoors types, you know; many of them were kind of living off the grid at the time, without electricity and those kinds of things. So it would have been really difficult to have them be comfortable and play the way that we were playing if I had taken them into a state-of-the-art recording studio at that time.” Besides the fact that a studio space would have felt too foreign, the group, which had formed around experiences making music at outdoor festivals, preferred the way that they sounded outside. Over the preceding year or so, they had found themselves deeply connecting over tunes at fiddler’s conventions. “That’s where we learned to play together. That’s where we liked the sound of our instruments.” Even without the expected guitar, the dense, overlapping twin fiddles, plunky fretless banjo, insistent banjo ukulele, and bass created a compelling, uninhibited groove. This was the sound they wanted to capture and share.<sup>12</sup> So Joe took the recording project outside.

After spending a long, sleepless, music-filled weekend jamming under the pine trees on “Hippie Hill” at the Mount Airy fiddlers’ convention in early June, 2007, the five friends—a batch of hip, younger musicians from Virginia, North Carolina, and New York—drove up to

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<sup>12</sup> A desire for fame or fortune did not motivate the band’s project: they never played a commercial gig or toured. At their album release party, one of the players skipped out.

Joe's parents' property in rural Madison, Virginia. There they recreated the kind of campsite that is common at summer festivals, stringing up the blue canvas tarp they had played under at Mt. Airy underneath some pine trees. Joe borrowed the ladder-back chairs from his mother's kitchen table (one was squeaky; at moments, it can be heard squeaking its way onto the album). To power Joe's laptop and run the recording software, Pro Tools, Joe ran an extension cord from the house out to their makeshift festival campsite/recording studio. Thoroughly warmed up and loopy from fiddlers' convention sleep deprivation, the band sat in a tight circle, just as they had at Mt. Airy.

Once folks were situated comfortably, where they could hear each other well, Joe set up the microphones. It is not uncommon to see four or five musicians playing knee-to-knee at summer festivals or house parties; the members of the band were particular about where they positioned themselves and liked to sit as close as possible. "We basically just continued playing as if we were at a fiddlers' convention, just having music sessions all day, and I just let the Pro Tools multitrack run. I think it was two evenings and one full day, and I think that was it for the session," Joe recounts. Starting Sunday evening, they recorded into early Monday morning. They followed up with another late afternoon and night of recording on Monday. Rather than playing tunes for 3 or so minutes for a recording, they played tunes as they had at Mount Airy, for ten minutes or as long as they wished, teasing out harmonies, discovering new rhythms, and digging for the kinds of feelings that had kept drawing them back together whenever they crossed paths. They wanted to capture the kind of transcendent, enveloping magic that happens late in the humid festival night, when the sounds of instruments merge and instruments seem to play themselves.



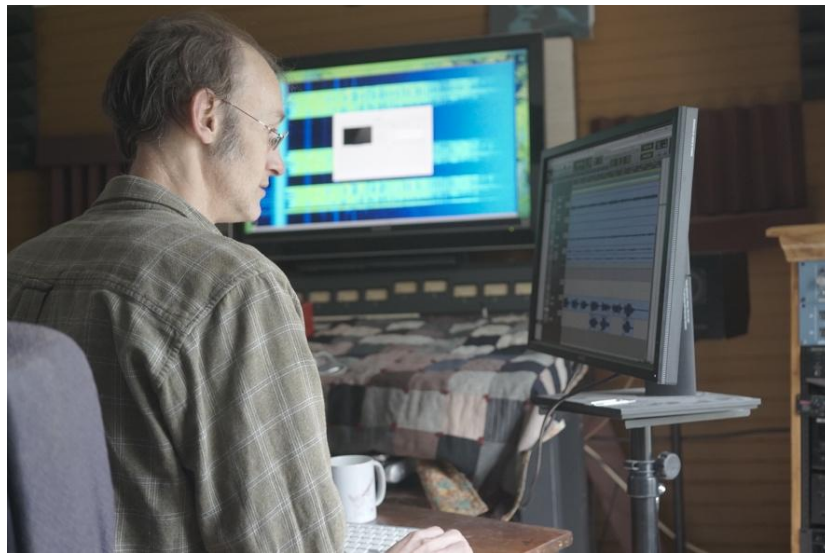
In the end, they filled Joe's hard drive with nearly ten hours of their music. After the recording session wrapped up, Joe kept the tarp up, carried his studio monitors outside, and began mixing the album in the same space. Besides the fact that Joe was returning to his Brooklyn apartment where mixing would be complicated by a roommate and the city's noises, he tells me he wanted to maintain the outside feeling and began mixing out there under the pines, panning the two fiddles hard to the left and right. He culled the most promising pieces and then found the grooviest three or so minutes within those. The results, released a year later on the album, caught the ears of the broader Old-time scene.

The *Light and Hitch* album sounded fresh, joyous, immersive, enveloping, and *familiar*. Because there were no overdubs or reverb, and minimal sound processing, listeners found themselves dropped into the middle of an amazing session with the sonics of a festival. The playing was as densely groovy as the grooviest jam at a festival, except even better, even more intimate—a kind of sonic sweet spot positioned perfectly inside the music. In spite of the fact that the band never played a gig or promoted the album, they sold over 2,000 copies (a substantial number of sales in the Old-time scene, especially for a band with no presence on the web). There's no telling how many copies were burned or shared over Dropbox. Over the last decade, the album has developed a cult following that stretches from kids attending the Berklee Roots music program to retirees at weekly pub sessions. A handful of the tunes have become standards at these sessions.

The combination of performance and familiar and intimate sonics make the album stand out. Like the festival scene and sound that it replicates, sounds bleed and blend. The album sounds live (Ake 2010); there is the squeak of chairs and the kerchunk of banjo player Andrew Norcross's wallet chain clinking during a fade-out. "If you listen carefully," Joe tells me, "you

can tell what time of day it was recorded by which insects and frogs you can hear in the background in the fade-in and fade-outs at the beginnings and ends of tunes. So [in] the nighttime pieces, you can actually hear crickets and katydids and nighttime insects. In the morning time, you can hear the songbirds.” Festival going listeners tune into these sounds (and recognize their own experiences with this music).

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*Figure 24 (above): Joe DeJarnette in the control room, Studio 808a, Floyd, Virginia, 13 March 2018. (photograph by author)*

*Studio 808a Floyd, Virginia  
Thursday, July 14, 2016  
Part 2*

It’s getting late and we’re losing our minds. Tennessee-born and Brooklyn-based banjo wiz Luke Richardson, guitar-playing San Francisco resident Karen Celia Heil, and I have spent the last three days holed up in the live room, a 14-by-14 foot space just down the hall from the parlor turned control room. Joe DeJarnette is playing bass with us and engineering. He runs back and forth between the control room and the live room, stomping through the old farmhouse. Otherwise, he stays in the live room with us, controlling our Pro Tools session with his iPad. The

late summer day gave out a few hours ago, and a chandelier hangs above us from the oddly high ceiling—a former owner knocked out the floor above and created an acoustically wonderful 25-foot-high room. The funky chandelier, filled with red, green, and blue candle-shaped light bulbs, creates a dim, trippy gloam that matches our mental state. Between the lights and our exhaustion, the large Oriental rug beneath swirls and morphs as it flows across the room from the kitchen behind me to the old-school butter churn (filled with bottles of booze) on the room's other side.

We've arranged ourselves in a tight circle underneath this chandelier. At 2 o'clock, Karen sits two or three feet away. We've decided not to use any electronic tuners and are playing a bit flat of concert pitch. Apparently, her guitar is not pleased with this decision; she's messing with the B string of her old Gibson L-1, a recalcitrant instrument that takes considerable coaxing to get in tune. Luke sits three feet away from me at 10 o'clock. Balanced between his thighs is a Chinese-made resonator banjo he purchased at a pawn shop in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee. It sounds ridiculously good for what it is. Between the three of us is a tangle of mic stands. The arms extend from each stand towards our instruments. At the ends, microphones of various shapes and sizes are angled *just so* towards our instruments. When he set them up, Joe had us sit down and start playing. After a few minutes of pacing around the room and listening intently, he started sticking his head inside the circle, putting his ear in front of each instrument, cocking his head this way and that, and determining which mics he wanted to use and where they should be aimed. Each mic has been carefully positioned, aimed and angled in particular ways. When we return from breaks, we're careful to hold our instruments more-or-less where they were when Joe set things up. A couple of shiny metal room mics float up above us just outside of our circle in the dimness of the room. They are meant to capture the space in stereo.

Joe returns to his little spot just three feet away from my left shoulder. It looks like he

stands behind a child's fort; a blue sleeping bag hangs over a mic stand with its arm extending parallel to the floor at waist height. Presumably, the sleeping bag is meant to temper the bass' sound, reducing how much it will be picked up in our microphones. *Bleed, bleed-thru, or leakage*—that's what recording engineers call this sonic issue, when a microphone intended for instrument A also picks up a bit of instrument B. Sounding like a lethal condition, the nomenclature suggests the typical attitude that most engineers have towards bleed. It's a thing to be fixed, minimized, or prevented altogether by placing musicians far away from each other, or, even better, in isolation booths where other instruments will be piped in through headphones. Even with Joe's careful microphone selection and placement, we're willing to risk some bleed to sit in this room together, read each other's gestures and cues, and hear and respond to our music in real-time and without headphones.

Joe picks up his iPad with our Pro Tools session on the screen. He clicks the record button and announces, "We rolling." We look at each other. It's quiet in the house except for the gentle splash of the fish tank in the adjacent kitchen; it's filled with colorful darters from the spring outside the house. I nod my head and bounce my fiddle up and down four times, cueing the band to our tempo, and give a big nod to cue our launch into "John Cooper's Tune"—a crooked version of "Durang's Hornpipe" that I learned from Cumberland Plateau fiddler Bob Townsend, who in turn learned it from a serendipitously made home recording of fiddler John Cooper. The band unleashes together and the sound smacks me and fills the room. Even though we're wiped from days of recording (I'm feeling so out of it that I keep insisting that my intonation is wrecked), we settle right into the groove. After we've played the tune for a little over two minutes, I make eye contact with Karen, Luke, and Joe, signaling that we're going to wrap it up at the end of the next B part. We nail the ending. We agree that it might have been

good, but realize that we're all bit out of it. Even though I keep insisting that I can't remember how to play my fiddle, Joe has us lay down a few more tracks. We rip through them.

Drained, we break, head into the kitchen, and drink a beer. We laugh. We chat. We step outside and listen to the cicadas. We pour a stiffer drink and head to the control room to listen back. To our amazement, this music that felt totally out of control and out of our heads sounds *just* right. It feels perfect. Somehow, we've captured music that feels as intense and intimate as our best session at a festival. It even holds up the next day, when we spend a few minutes listening back before we start the last day of the session.

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### **Bleed As a Sign of Life: Tracking, Mixing, and Editing for Closeness and Liveness**

"I'm actually not trying to *create* anything. I'm trying to *capture* something," Joe tells me about his process in the studio.<sup>13</sup> I've mistakenly asked him about the sounds he's *creating* at Studio

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<sup>13</sup> I ask Joe to tell me about the range of approaches to recording Old-time in his studio. He tells me about the extremes. At one extreme of these live tracking sessions are bands like the Crooked Road Ramblers, a regularly gigging local dance band, made up of working-class musicians who maximize studio time, cutting up to 40 tunes—more than enough for two albums—in a day in the studio. Their performances are rhythmically tight, and they know their repertoire exceptionally well. With a band like this one, Joe uses two large-diaphragm omnidirectional mics. He describes the process:

We spend probably close to an hour setting up. And so I'm sort of pre-mixing the album by physically moving the musicians around the room in relationship to each other and the microphones and the walls. That is the mix. So once we spend our hour doing that, I press record. Go . . . There's no mixing really. So by the time I've listened to them for the six hours up in the recording studio I've already dialed in the eq and because it's two-track . . . I would say that is the extreme on one side of just doing it quickly and organically and cheaply. And I love those projects cause they're just fun. You're not working on them long enough to get bored with them. It's so clear what you're trying to do. I remember this particular client came up after I had sort of done the original thing. And he listened for, I don't know, 20 or 30 seconds—he goes "yep, I can hear all the instruments, let's go!" And that's like a six piece band right?

At the other extreme are clients who choose to track each instrument individually, using headphones and click tracks. Although this is not Joe's preferred way to record Old-time music, he is happy to work in this more time-intensive way since it is more lucrative. He describes this process,

I have other clients who do completely the opposite [of the Crooked Road Ramblers]. They book the studio for, say, ten days and come in, and they'll do one or two songs a day. And they'll do each individual instrument separately. They'll use headphones. Sometimes they'll even use a click track. They might do twenty or thirty takes of each part on each tune, and then they'll got through and meticulously edit each part until they essentially have something very close to perfect all the way through in terms of pitch and timing and all that kind of stuff.

808a, and he feels it necessary to correct me, explaining that he understands his work with Old-time as *capturing* rather than creating.<sup>14</sup> “It kind of informs the process a little bit—it’s that I’m more trying to capture what’s happening there in the room rather than create something new for the recording that wasn’t already there.” The process of capturing these sounds plays out in the live room, where Old-time musicians typically sit down as if they were jamming or playing at a festival.

Joe’s not simply trying to capture the music; he’s trying to capture a sense of closeness and intimacy—both sonic and social—that reflects the kinds of experiences his clients have had with the music and the tightly knit social world where the music takes place. He explains, “Our best experiences with it [Old-time music] have been really close up. It has been either as a player or as a listener in a very sort of intimate, close experience with the music and the musicians.” He traces a feedback loop between his clients’ listening habits, experiences making music, and his studio practices tracking, mixing, and mastering Old-time, “They’re accustomed to listening to field recordings, old homemade recordings, where things are not isolated. They don’t typically listen with headphones. So they’re most comfortable if they can just sit down right beside each other, or across from each other. It’s been my experience that they perform better; they give a much better performance in the recording and other environments if they’re hearing themselves in a really organic way—all together in the same room.”

Putting all these instruments in close proximity with microphones introduces bleed into the mix. Joe has developed an aesthetic of bleed, transforming what most engineers hear as a problem to his advantage, as a way to suggest closeness and liveness. This aesthetic guides his

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<sup>14</sup> This distinction between recordings as *capturing* and as *creating* catches ethnomusicologist Tom Turino’s attention too. In writing about documentary field recordings, he points out that microphone placement and sound equalization allow recordists “to *create*, not merely capture, the sound that the documenter wants to hear and present to others on a recording” (2008: 69).

microphone choices. “People are sometimes very surprised at the microphone choices that I use in my studio,” Joe confides to me. Indeed, I’ve watched him swap out a nice vintage Neumann microphone for an old Electro-Voice microphone he purchased on EBay for \$40. “They are not necessarily the microphones that would sound the best on those given instruments were they to be recorded in isolation. But I’m also taking into account what the microphone is picking up of the thing beside it.” Back in the control room when he begins mixing the microphones, he pays careful attention to bleed, “One of the things that I kind of want is for the bleed—in other words the leakage from the other instruments—that’s coming into the primary mic from different instruments to be pleasing.” He explains, “When I pull the fiddle microphone up on a string band recording, I don’t just get fiddle. I’m also getting what the guitar sounds like from the fiddler’s perspective. . . . And what I want is when I turn all the faders up together and I start crafting a mix using volume and panning, I want the listener to have a sense of what it was like to be there.”

Efforts to give listeners a sense of what it was like to be in the session shape his mixing and editing, and his ability to manage bleed allows him to convey the closeness of the recording session. After all, Joe points out that most consumers of his Old-time stringband recordings are also musicians, and they want to feel the closeness of the music,

If the recording gives the listener the experience of being in the session, that’s an asset. The majority of the audience for these recordings would love to be in that session with those musicians. The majority of my clients are selling at least a portion of the products that result from these recording sessions to students at camps and to fellow musicians at fiddlers’ conventions. So a recording that captures the feeling and the sonic impression of being intimately involved and inside the music and inside the interactions between the musicians becomes a very desirable characteristic. And the moment you muddy any of that up with artificial space, or even real space—something that takes the listener away from the experience of being right there, intimately hearing the details of the individual instruments, is generally undesirable.

This desire for close mixes shapes Joe's use of reverb on Old-time projects. He uses minimal reverb and gently mixes in space through stereo room mics to try to replicate how the session sounded up close in the room. "My rule with reverb is that when it gets loud enough that you can hear it, it's too much," he explains.

Managing bleed has become a part of Joe's art. He tells me, "It is challenging to mix those sessions, because each time you adjust one microphone, it affects the sound of other microphones. But I came up with something that really works. It's been really popular. I think at this point people actually seek me out as a recording engineer to get that kind of sound in those sorts of situations."

Critically, the aesthetics that guide these recording projects tie back to the social world of the music. Joe explains the coupling:

Our best experiences with it [Old-time music] have been really close-up. It has been either as a player or as a listener in a very sort of intimate, close experience with the music and the musicians. So when you add that reverb or big room mic sound that takes you farther away from the experience, most of us tend to feel like something is lost. And we love the detail of being really, really close. In fact, I actually had someone once comment, "Well Joe, with your recordings I feel like I'm in the band, rather than watching it from far away." And if you think about what people's experience with pop music is, that totally makes sense. Right? Because they're gonna see them [pop musicians] in a large theater or a stadium or something and they're likely gonna be much further away. . . . This kind of music takes place in smaller spaces, so I've always tried to reflect that in the aesthetic choices I make in mixing the music.

So, Joe mixes for closeness, capturing and creating a sound that defines many of the most popular Old-time albums released in the last decade.

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### **"It's Right Accurate": Creating Liveness and Intimacy in East Tennessee**

Since 1998, musician Tony Thomas has been recording and releasing albums of field recordings of players around his home in Clinton, Tennessee. Now in his retirement, he's turned



his attention to making music, which he's always found a source of pleasure:

I worked for over thirty years there in Oak Ridge, and I only played when I *could*. I worked when I needed to, and I played when I *could*. That's the way it was with me. I always played some on the weekends and some in the evenings when I had an opportunity to. But I kept my day job and got my retirement in. And when I retired, I just went on to it on a more full-time scale. But the love was always there. I was actually—in my mind while I was on the job, I was always playing in my mind. I loved it that good. I kept songs going all the time – even on the job. (Thomas 2011)<sup>15</sup>

Tony kept his songs going over the years, playing guitar and singing in a handful of bluegrass bands—the Mystery Mountain Boys, the Backwoods Boys, and Coalcreek—that attracted diehard local fans.<sup>16</sup> Like many other East Tennessee musicians, Tony is more interested in the pleasure that music brings him, and less concerned with policing the boundaries of genre. However, even as Tony's expansive sense of local music leaves him mostly invisible to the broader “middle class Old-time cohort” (Turino 2008: 161), he plays a critical role in sustaining Old-time music in his community, and has worked hard to promote Charlie McCarroll's music, helping him receive some well-deserved attention.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The following quotations from Tony Thomas come from an interview with him (Thomas 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Tony Thomas maintains a YouTube page where he posts his original compositions, banjo lessons, and videos of Charlie McCarroll fiddling. It can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-r08w31N13tOP39fZG7AgQ>.

<sup>17</sup> As fascinating and solid as I find the music on Tony, Charlie, and Jack's album to be, it's a sleeper in the broader Old-time scene. I'm not entirely sure why this is the case because it seems to align with many of the things that Old-time musicians value, especially as it conveys a strong sense of place and articulates powerful understandings of oldness and liveness. Some listening connoisseurs have stumbled across and come to appreciate Charlie McCarroll and the band's music. Knowing the Old-time canon, they recognize the McCarroll name. Because they've listened deeply to the weird world of home recordings, these connoisseurs dig the sonic funkiness and expansive sense of genre that the album exhibits. However, listening connoisseurs aside, I suspect that the album may be too wild and the sense of genre too broad for the average member of the “middle class Old-time cohort” (Turino 2008). While liveness matters deeply to this group, they are less likely to embrace something as local and funky—something as *off* as this album. There are important differences between Studio 808a and Tony's projects. While recordings from Studio 808a may be live, they have professional sonics and, more often than not, the recording artists have a presence online and at Old-time festivals. These artists are hustling in the scene and are recognizable to this cohort. On the other hand, I think that Tony's project pushes the sonic and genre boundaries too far for the “middle class Old-time cohort” listeners who prefer a clean contemporary live recording over crusty source recordings. The packaging of Tony's album is simple and basic. It might not look “cool.” Also, the fact that Tony doesn't attend festivals like Clifftop could account for the lack of circulation in the broader world of Old-time. While he is aware

I met Tony in the early 2000s when I was working on a Cumberland Plateau vernacular music project for state park manager and folklorist Bobby Fulcher. I regularly spun cuts from Tony's deep recording catalogue on our weekly radio show. Raised around music in the coal-mining community of Briceville, Tennessee, and having spent time working as a coal miner, Tony has the street cred to connect with local audiences. His songs about mining disasters, delivered in his rich, gently accented baritone, are especially poignant. Around 2008, when I became obsessed with Charlie McCarroll's fiddling, I got to know Tony a bit more. Tony and Charlie were performing together at the time. A few years before, they had recorded an album featuring Charlie's fiddling for a short-lived local label. In 2010, I bumped into Tony again at a concert or at the Great Southern Fiddlers Convention in Chattanooga, and bought this curious album—*Sawbriar Ridge Sessions*—from him. Although field recordings abound in the Old-time scene and labels like the Field Recorders Collective specialize in releasing field recordings for consumption, it's not every day that you run into someone selling a *self-produced* album of field recordings. As odd as the concept was to me, the music was compelling. Charlie's playing was creative and, even as it seemed to strive for a sheen of authenticity, the sound of the album and the performances felt unexpectedly intimate and honest. Beyond engaging with a tired, layered history of representation that involved folklorists, A&R men, and various performances of hillbilly identities, the album was telling an important story about Charlie's musical world and the kinds of things that mattered in that world.

The fact that Tony makes and sells recordings of himself and his friends in a region that

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of the bigger Old-time scene, Tony seems content to perform and sell his music regionally. Mostly, I think Tony connects with a different audience than the mainstream Old-time audience. Whatever the case may be, I still suspect that his album would be challenging for the majority of Old-time listeners (and appealing to connoisseurs who've cultivated a taste for the liveness, oldness, and offness inherent in the many self-produced and self-released albums that circulate on the fringes of the genre).

folklorists and cultural workers have long mined for field recordings makes his projects all the worthier of attention.<sup>18</sup> Of course, there's the obvious critical angles that his project invites, like the way his field recording projects riff on expectations and understandings of what field recordings are, who makes them, and how they are consumed. Or the way that Tony's producing field recordings counters narratives of perpetual cultural loss, partially inherited from earlier cultural interventions in Appalachia and dated visions of folklore (Whisnant 2009). Or that Tony uses his field recordings to claim the mantle and fill the void left by all these "vanishing" musicians.<sup>19</sup> In assuming the role of field recordist in Appalachia, Tony claims an authority that, for the better part of a century, has been held largely by outsider folklorists and cultural interpreters. These are not insignificant actions.

While these questions deserve consideration, I am most interested in parsing out the more

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<sup>18</sup>The three musicians involved in the *Sawbriar Ridge Sessions* project live in Roane and Anderson counties, along the eastern edge of Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau and about an hour and half and two hour drive northeast from Chattanooga. Although there is a rich history of Old-time fiddle music in these counties, bluegrass, gospel, and classic Country music prevail at local jams and music halls. Seventy-five year old Charlie McCarroll traces fiddling in his family back five generations. Living in Alabama and working construction for much of his adult life, Charlie fiddled in bluegrass bands on weekends. A decade or so ago, he returned to his family's Old-time fiddle repertoire, especially the music of his uncle George and his father Jimmy McCarroll, who recorded 12 sides for Columbia in 1928 and 1929. These sides, which were reissued on vinyl in 1972 and again on CD in 2003, introduced the McCarroll's music to the national Old-time community, sparked interest in his son Charlie's playing, and led to invitations from high-profile traditional music events like the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes and the Swannanoa Gathering. The third member of the *Sawbriar Ridge Sessions* trio was Roane County native Jack Sandifer, Charlie McCarroll's long-time playing partner, who backed him up on guitar and banjo until his death in 2009.

<sup>19</sup> When I was beginning to write this project, I happened to have dinner with Barry Poss, who cut his teeth at Dave Freeman's County record label in the late 1970s before launching his own highly successful Sugar Hill label. Having stumbled into the heady Old-time revival scene of 1970s Durham and Chapel Hill and then immersed himself in County's world of Old-time reissues and their releases of living masters, Barry has a strong sense of Old-time's trajectory over the last 40 years. I told him that I was interested in thinking about how a musical community so obsessed with and invested in the idea of face-to-face learning—visiting old masters—was shifting. In my mind, I was thinking of Clyde Davenport, who is now 96 and is more or less viewed as one of the last real Old-time musicians. I was also thinking about new programs at Berklee and East Tennessee State University. Either way, I conveyed a sense of worry over how the music would change, what it would sound like, and how people would learn once all the old players were gone. Barry looked up at me, completely unfazed, and asked, "What's new?" These anxieties and this particular story of loss, he told me, had been a part of the music since he first encountered it four decades earlier. They seemed to create a perpetual existential dilemma within a genre that predicated its existence on a sense of loss and a desire to preserve something.

profound story that this recording made audible, and what it revealed about Charlie and Tony's musical world and aesthetics. Like Studio 808a, a kind of liveness entangled with intimate experiences with the music was at the heart of things. However, the sonics conveying this kind of musical and social closeness were profoundly different. While Joe DeJarnette created a sense of closeness and liveness that is accurate and hi-fi, well-mixed, and carefully presented, Tony's recording sounds fuzzy and lo-fi, unbalanced, and haphazardly presented. Yet they both insisted on liveness and generated an overwhelming sense of closeness. Tony's album is full of incidental sounds (made by the musicians) that could have been edited out or lessened through signal processing. But they remain. Jazz scholar David Ake compellingly argues that these sorts of extra-musical sonic artifacts insist on a recording's liveness, reminding us that "someone—literally some *body*—created this sound," leaving "an aural-only trace of the corporeal activity" of music making (2010: 51). Things that might be considered distracting noises in a studio (or home studio) transform into signs of liveness at a jam at Jack's house, expressing one vision of how Old-time music is (or should be) made in East Tennessee. In conveying liveness, Tony shows listeners what matters in his musical community, and what matters most are relationships, made audible through an informal performance and through talk.

### **Space, Sound, and Intimacy**

Presenting the music through this eminently live and ostensibly unfiltered framing device of the field recording, Tony invites listeners into a moment of intimate, face-to-face music making—an informal jam session in guitarist and banjo player Jack Sandifer's living room. Although Jack, Charlie, and Tony enjoyed playing in Harriman at the park along the river and at Don's Barber Shop, they decided to play at Jack's home since his health was starting to fail him by October 2008. He passed away the following spring, making these recordings a document of

friendship as well as music.

Jack's parlor is a cozy space marked on one end by a stone fireplace with dark black mortar.<sup>20</sup> Two dark-stained wooden wagon-wheel-shaped lighting fixtures with upturned, rippled, flower-shaped glass shades rest just below the ceiling on either side of the chimney, contributing a rustic, country-chic '70s vibe to the space. Framed pictures of family members—a recent looking high school portrait, several older-looking studio portraits of children, and a wedding photo of a young couple, among others—fill spaces along the mantle and creep onto surrounding walls. These photos take up prime real estate throughout the room. A largemouth bass (stuffed) leaps from its mounting on the stone chimney. A metal replica steam engine and coal car sit on the mantle below. Doilies adorn tabletops and blankets cover furniture. Whatever this space is, it is a far cry from a recording studio. It's a comfy domestic space, with the acoustics of a small room filled with cushy furniture, knick-knacks, and walls covered in photos.

Charlie and Jack sit next to each other on a couch that runs along a window. Charlie leans back into the couch with his fiddle, while Jack sits on the edge with his guitar. Holding a banjo, Tony sits in a straight back chair just across from Charlie, less than an arm's length away, creating a triangle. For his field recording session, Tony set up two omnidirectional microphones, running them into his four-track Fostex cassette recorder. It's a very basic setup. This is the scene that Tony's recordings documented.

Tony pushes the record button. Reels turn. Tape rolls. Jack's parlor is made live.

"Dill Pickle Rag?" Tony asks. He's just hit "Record." Through headphones, it sounds as

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<sup>20</sup> Videos, posted on Tony's YouTube site, give a sense of the scene in Jack's parlor. They can be seen at the following links: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eMiSnLCu\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eMiSnLCu_A) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5s2HC-gNaIY> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lcBjviC7iA&t=67s>

if he's leaning away from the microphone, messing with the recorder. "Your uncle played on that one—right, Charlie?" Tony's voice moves from the center of the stereo field to a spot a little to the right; as it shifts, it increases in volume, as he gets situated back in his chair. With this shift in weight, the floor (or maybe it's his chair) gives off a woody pop (These sorts of sounds—pops, creaks, thuds, clangs—are all over the album, at the intros and outros). A sustained hiss from the tape and four track recorder—like the sound of a finger lightly tracing across a sheet of paper—rests like a cloud in the upper frequencies of the mix.

"Yessir," Charlie answers, his voice close and centered.

"What was his name?"

"George."

"Uncle George. George—was he a McCarroll?"

"Uncle George McCarroll. My daddy's brother."

"You played the guitar many a time with him."

"Yes I did, buddy."

"Let's do it, Charlie." Tony peppers Charlie with rapid-fire questions. For Tony, there is no new information here in this field-recording-styled exchange. They're having a conversation they've had before for the benefit of the listeners. This exchange sets the format that continues throughout the tracks, shifting back and forth between this interview/interviewee style and a corny, downhome patter that sounds like the kind of talk in a 1920s skit on a 78, like one of the four sides of Gid Tanner and His Skillet Lickers' "A Corn Licker Still in Georgia."

Charlie plucks his fiddle's G string. Jack hits a bass note on his guitar. They're the kinds of incidental sounds that happen right before tunes start. Charlie and Jack kick off the tune together (kind of). Three beats in, Tony strums the banjo. It's a kind of exclamation point of a

strum—maybe a bit too loud and little out of time. It’s a wild, messy start, but things settle into a pleasing lope after a few seconds. Besides his Uncle George, Charlie’s father, Jimmy McCarroll, played this reworked ragtime piece, even recording it under the name “Everybody Two Step” at a 1929 Columbia session in Atlanta.<sup>21</sup> As Jack and Tony accompany Charlie, they strip things down and just play the root and the five chords, leaving out the two chord that gives Charlie’s father’s rendering a slightly more urbane feel.

The trio gallops along. Underneath their gallop in the realm of subwoofers, a foot taps insistently, creating a subtle, thudding bassy pulse. (Charlie is a chronic foot tapper, and I imagine it’s his foot doing the tapping.) The alternating bass notes of Jack’s guitar keep time in the left channel. Charlie and Tony, who is strumming his banjo with a pick, compete for space in the mix just to the right of the center. The fiddle sounds a bit thin and a little garbled. It’s not the clearest mix, nor is it the muddiest. On their last pass through, the whole mix wobbles to the right for a second before returning back home. Artifacts of Tony’s analog equipment—trippy, melty sonic swirls and dropouts—can be heard throughout the album. Sometimes they’re subtle. Other times, like this time, they’re impossible to ignore. As they reach the end, Jack drops out as Charlie, who specializes in unexpected, shifty endings, throws down a double tag on the fiddle with Tony chasing him out of the tune on the banjo. The band screeches to a halt.

“Dill Pickle Rag!” Tony announces.

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In June of 2011, I visit Tony at his house on a ridge just outside of Clinton, Tennessee. We sit in his living room and talk. He tells me that the jam session captured on this recording

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<sup>21</sup> Like a good number of pieces that got renamed, reworked, and (re)recorded, “Everybody Two Step” or the “Dill Pickle Rag” had lived a former life on the page as sheet music. The McCarrolls’ piece, which a handful of Old-time bands recorded in the 1920s, was loosely based on ragtime composer Charles L. Johnson’s tune, “Dill Pickles.”

was “special” to him, and I ask him why.

“Just the brotherhood of it,” he explains. “We all had the same goals in common. We were on the same wavelength – all of us were. That made it very special.”

“When you go and record, whether it’s a field recording or a studio recording, what do you like to—if you’re listening back to your field recordings or if you’re in the studio, what makes you know that you’re going to keep a track? Is there something that you can hear?”

“You can just hear it. You can just tell when it’s right. Yeah, you can just tell when it’s right.”

“What makes it right? What is the thing that you hear and you just . . .”

“You can just feel the spirit in it. Yeah, you can just feel it.” He uses the language of faith. “It’s just a good feeling—a good spirit you’re feeling from what you’re doing. You can tell when you start a recording project when it feels right—when it feels really right. And I’ve not done one yet that didn’t feel right. Cause my heart’s in it. And you can always tell when their heart is in it” (Thomas 2011).

Tony’s wooly, seemingly less-mediated field recordings create a path for listeners to encounter these elusive qualities of spirit and feeling and to sense the liveness of these close relationships as they play out in the session. As he brings listeners into the privacy of Jack’s house, he’s also bringing them into relationships. He values the feeling of brotherhood—a *good spirit*—that emerges from the jam. It’s a critical aspect of the project. This sense of close-knit sociality undergirds the recording and fills it with personal meaning. These social bonds extend beyond the immediate activity of playing tunes into the talk that maps networks and retraces links to players past and present, like Charlie’s Uncle George or father Jimmy. “We talk about the old players a lot,” Tony tells me about his jam sessions with Charlie. “Every time we have a



session, we talk about different musicians and the way they played. How much we enjoyed hearing them play” (Thomas 2011). When I spent four days visiting with Charlie in late July of 2008, we spent a lot of our time talking about the musicians with whom he had crossed paths, what they had taught him, and what they did well. In the following years, when I’d give Charlie a call, he’d want to talk about the different musicians that influenced him and which of their pieces he most appreciated. He’d ask me about which of our music friends I’d seen lately and how they were doing—*How’s Bobby doing these days? He came by Rocky Top Store and played a few tunes with me about a month ago. I think they’ve got him working too much at that park. He’s a good banjo picker, don’t you think? When are you going to come back and see me?* In this world of East Tennessee music making, relationships matter and sessions are a place for them to be affirmed and made live.

As Tony guides the recording along and Charlie and Jack chip in, their shifting modes of speech generate and recall other kinds of liveness. In the field recording mode, Tony draws on the kinds of speech heard on old field recordings—the earnest folklorist questioning the fiddler about tune sources, tunings, and stories. This mode of talk conjures a history of images—the researcher, the recording device, the musician—that is unquestionably live. These kinds of interactions are regularly parodied in the contemporary Old-time community (e.g., in Tom Krueger’s 2013 film *Deep on Hog Mountain*, and in the way that players mock Alan Lomax’s insistent questions in his field recordings of North Carolina fiddler Marcus Martin: “What is the next tune, Mr. Martin?”).<sup>22</sup>

The second mode of speech that they slip into recalls the kinds of talk found on 1920s Old-time records and, then and now, insists on a kind of liveness. Folklorist John Minton

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<sup>22</sup> Tom Krueger’s film offers a scathing critique of obsessions with purity and authenticity among a century’s worth of music researchers in Appalachia. The film can be seen at the following link: <https://vimeo.com/59084814>.

describes the history of speech on these early recordings in detail, thoroughly cataloguing the speech and skits and the ways they invoked liveness through sonic representations of live social events (e.g., a fiddler's convention, a barbecue, a square dance, liquor making) and domestic music making (e.g., a knock on the door) (Minton 2008). Minton summarizes, "Old-time records are rife with spoken asides, monologues, or dramas tying their contents to live music-making" (2008: 35). These skits and forms of speech were often set in the recording artist's community and, as a clever marketing ploy, made reference to local places and people, allowing local listeners to feel a sense of participation (Carlin 2003).<sup>23</sup> On these old 78s, it is clear that speech was regularly used as a way to frame the recording as a representation of face-to-face music making.

Wittingly or unwittingly, Tony's recordings enter into this tradition. Among a number of other places, the dialogue surrounding Tony, Charlie, and Jack's performance of "Cackling Hen" captures the feel of the older 78s:

Tony: Charlie, let's me and you and—let's me and you and Jack make the feathers fly on this one here. Stir up that old Dominicker rooster.

Charlie: Yeah.

Tony: Yeah, buddy. Do that old "Cacklin' Hen" one time.

*They play the tune.*

Tony: Made the feathers fly, didn't we?

Charlie: Yeah, I believe the feathers kept a-going.

The barnyard humor and reference to a feisty Dominicker rooster squarely align with the kind of humorous chatter heard on old hillbilly 78-RPM recordings. In fact, Charlie's father Jimmy

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<sup>23</sup> Old-time recordings invoked the liveness and sociality of square dancing as well. Between 1924 and 1933, the voice of some 44 square dance callers was captured on 95 recordings, guiding listeners through figures with local calling patter (Jamison 2015: 84).

McCarroll's contemporary Clayton McMichen—a regular participant on the Skillet Lickers skits—recorded a version of the tune as “Old Hen Cackle” for Decca in 1939 (Russell 2004: 573).<sup>24</sup> Throughout McMichen's recording, he and his band mates fire off a string of fowl jokes (no pun intended). About two minutes in, one of them says, “Look at that Dominicker now, boys. Look at that Dominicker. Watch that head hen strut through the barnyard.” Regardless of whether Tony intentionally alludes to McMichen's recording, the spoken commentary and the reflexivity of Tony and Charlie recall a much longer history of framing recordings as live (and often emplaced) music making (Minton 2008).

### **Field Recordings, Unrehearsed Performances, and the Liveness of First Takes**

“We didn't rehearse that stuff. We ain't never rehearsed no field recordings.” Tony tells me about his field recordings. “It sounds the best, doesn't it?” he insists. “I'm for bands rehearsing. Don't get me wrong. I'm not against that. But when you do a field recording, it's better when you just go sit down with him [Charlie McCarroll] and just do it” (Thomas 2011).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Charlie and his brother Tom McCarroll, tell me that Jimmy McCarroll was connected to many of the 1920s Old-time recording artists from the North Georgia scene. In Tom's bedroom, he had an old Gibson L Junior guitar hanging on the wall that, according to family stories, his father had gotten from the famous Skillet Lickers guitarist Riley Puckett.

<sup>25</sup> During my visit, Tony tells me about a video project he is producing of Charlie McCarroll's playing. Pointing to a corner of his den, he tells me, “We sat right there and done it. We just done it. We didn't plan it or nothing. And that's what I like about it. Charlie is the type you can sit down, and you don't have to make no plans. You just sit down and do it with him. You just get in your mind, and you come up with things, and you mention it. ‘Yeah, we can do it.’ And he'll do it and do it good. He's that unique.”

Looking back at this statement, I'm curious, having spent time with Charlie in a recording studio a few years later. Tony's description of Charlie as a free-flowing performer in a recording session doesn't square with my experiences. In 2012, I found myself in a guest room turned studio with Charlie McCarroll in Caryville, Tennessee. Besides some acoustic baffling on the walls and the mics, mic stands, and cables, it felt pretty homey to me. My folklorist and musician friend Bobby Fulcher had started a recording project with McCarroll and had asked me to come and accompany Charlie on the banjo. In my opinion, the session was a disaster. Charlie didn't really want to do more than one take of anything, and, to complicate matters more, he didn't play through the pieces very long. We recorded live. After little more than an hour or so, he started looking exasperated and frustrated. We took a break for lunch, hoping that it would reinvigorate the session, but things didn't improve much that day. It didn't take long for Charlie to start displaying his frustration. In the end, after the studio efforts went awry, Bobby rounded out the album *McCarroll Blood* (2016) with a few tracks drawn from live concert performances.

His insistence that this type of unrehearsed, more informal recording “sounds the best” distinguishes field recordings from other more obviously mediated recording processes. Besides the kind of intimate liveness conveyed through a field recording of a living room jam session (where women’s voices seep in from conversations in the kitchen), Tony likes the way that field recordings unfold as series of first-takes. As unrehearsed performances, his field recordings capture a particular kind of liveness—the liveness and fresh creative energy of first-takes.

In our conversation, Tony tells me stories that imbue first-takes with an almost magical energy. He enlists Roy Acuff, fellow East Tennessean and “King of Country Music,” to elaborate this point, “Roy Acuff recorded a lot of songs in his career, and he’d tell them at the studio, he says, ‘Let’s get it right the first time. The more you do it, the worse it sounds.’ And they would do the first take on it” (Thomas 2011). This statement—*the more you do it, the worse it sounds*—reveals the aesthetic values in play in Tony’s recording projects. Spontaneity, freshness, and the ability to execute on demand (the flipside of which is the ability to recover from potential mistakes) are far more valuable than canned, flawless, and lifeless performances constructed over multiple takes. Importantly, these are skills that Tony and his bandmates have

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There’s no way for me to understand completely what was going on that day in the studio. However, it would make sense that the difference in expectations between producers might account for the kind of ease-filled sessions Tony describes and the kind of angst-filled session I witnessed. Tony’s approach, making an album of field recordings in Jack’s living room filled with first-takes, may have put Charlie at ease. Certainly, the fact that Jack and Tony were old friends didn’t hurt anything. In contrast, Bobby’s approach, laboring away in a recording studio to get a really solid take or enough takes of piece to edit something good together, may have been uncomfortable or tiresome. What emerges are two different understandings of what kinds of performances are acceptable to release on a commercial album. Both Tony and Charlie seem much less concerned with flawless performances so long as the energy and feel of the jam is there. Mistakes are acceptable. On the other hand, Bobby, who was making an album for a national audience, sought, understandably, to capture the absolutely best performance he could. Both approaches are in play in the East Tennessee Old-time community. Tony values a recorded performance because of who the performers are, the broader traditions they represent, and the relationships the recording documents. While Bobby’s approach doesn’t deny this aspect, it values the performance differently, orienting around technical execution. In this logic, just because Charlie’s father was a legendary old master, and he represents a five-generation familial tradition, doesn’t mean that the average listener will appreciate a recording of a rough performance.

refined in the context of live performances in front of audiences at venues around the region. They are the same skills that his field recordings put on display.

Tony offers me another story to drive home his point about the power of first-takes. It is drawn from his experiences recording in Hal Duncan’s Cumberland Studio in Oliver Springs, TN, a small, rural studio that served a network of Anderson and Roane County Country, gospel, and bluegrass musicians,

We used to record at Cumberland [studio] and Uncle Hal, I call him—“Uncle Hal”—Hal Duncan would say, “Tony, that was alright, but I know you boys can do it better.” And we would sometimes do it, but it wouldn’t be better. I’d say, “Hal, you keep this first cut, and then we’ll go back and see which one sounds best to us.” . . . And the first cut was always the best one. He always thought we could do something better, and he would have a tendency, when you was recording, he’d stop you right in the middle of the song — something had happened—or at least he thought he’d heard something that wasn’t right. And we’d finally say, “Well, damn it, Hal! You just push the buttons in there and leave the picking up to us.” (Thomas 2011)<sup>26</sup>

Unlike studios with their meddling engineers who impinge on expression of creativity, Tony’s field recordings allow him to capture players doing their thing. And, in his community, jam sessions are where that thing really happens. Tony’s insistence that “the first cut was always the best one” leads him to set up mics and roll tape in Jack’s living room. In doing so, he captures the spontaneity and liveness of the music he makes with his friends.

### **Doubling Down on Liveness: Generating Liveness through the Sounds of Old Technology**

The liveness of the jam session is also reproduced through the old equipment that Tony uses to produce the album. By using old technologies that introduce sonic artifacts, Tony doubles down on liveness and presents a particular idea about local sounds. Drawing on her research in South African recording studios, Louise Meintjes writes, “The sound of old technology . . .

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<sup>26</sup> I recorded in Cumberland Studio around 2001 with older East Tennessee fiddler Charlie Acuff and the Lantana Drifters, an older string band that played around East Tennessee and the Cumberland Plateau for decades. My experience in this studio was very loose compared to my experiences in other studios. There was little fussiness over microphone placement or sound separation. It was a comfortable space.

paradoxically generates liveness by referencing old recording techniques” (2003: 124). The sounds of older technologies recall an era when limited technologies forced players to be in the same space making music together. The link between old sounds and liveness certainly holds true among Old-time musicians, among whom there is considerable curiosity and exploration of older recording technologies like the wax cylinder and 78. Because Old-time musicians work diligently to emulate old recordings, the sonics of these recordings—hissy surface noises and pops, and analog warbles—become linked to the imagined live performances that contemporary players strive to recover and reimagine. These imaginative listening and learning efforts fill old recordings with life and cause these sonic artifacts to resonate with liveness. This is one way that the sounds of old technology come to signify liveness in Old-time.

While the sounds of Tony’s equipment are not nearly as old as cylinders or 78s, they still register as dated, especially as they circulate alongside releases from studios like Studio 808a. Remember that *Bluegrass Unlimited* review that invoked “primitive” recording conditions (McIntyre 2009). For listeners, “the recently outdated” technology on which the album was made serves to confirm its liveness and a kind of otherness, perhaps Appalachianess, of the performed field recordings (Taussig 1993: 232).<sup>27</sup> The sonics work their magic: they lead the reviewer to place the music in “another era” and imagine Jack’s perfectly comfortable 21<sup>st</sup> century living room as “primitive conditions” (McIntyre 2009). The dropouts, warbles, and hiss of Tony’s older (and more limited) Fostex four-track, operating within the frame of field recording, signify

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<sup>27</sup> In a mimetic moment, Tony produces recordings meant to sound like a folklorist’s field recordings, using equipment that Michael Taussig would describe as “recently outdated” (1993: 232). Time and space blend. Taussig writes: “Defined in advance as backward and always lagging behind, Third Worlds are exemplary of the recently outdated” (1993: 232). It is not a stretch to suggest that in contemporary American culture, Appalachia is imagined both as backwards and lagging behind. Tony’s use of consumer-grade analog recording equipment in the digital era lends his recordings a “recently outdated” sound, which in turn confirms his identity as an Appalachian folk musician. Historian George Brock-Nannestad points out that the cassettes Tony uses continue to be useful in Third Worlds or “in regions that are not interesting to the large international recording organizations” (2009: 164).

liveness and invite listeners to imagine the tape rolling and the musicians chatting and playing in real time in Jack's living room.

However, Tony insists the recordings are “accurate” and “great,” suggesting an aesthetic that either appreciates or is unfazed by imperfections, distortions, and other artifacts of old technologies (see Larkin 2008, Novak 2011, Sutton 1996). Tracking his sound production process reveals his attitudes about his equipment; he presents the process in uncomplicated terms. He explains, “First, I take my tapes, which is usually on a four-track. I take my four-track tape and put it over onto a master cassette tape. And then I take the master cassette tape and edit it onto a master CD. And it works great.” In taking this step and using the technology he uses—from cassette tape to master cassette tape, Tony is following a production flow that has become, for the most part, obsolete in the U.S. Besides hipsters reverting to cassette technologies because they create a lo-fi, DIY, analog vibe, this kind of process has largely given way to easier and more powerful digital processes. However, Tony's projects are untouched by these powerful digital tools. Tony then tells me about his mixing process: “I mixed it to where I got it just as close to what it really was. It's right accurate. It's right on it. I mean, what you heard there out of that session is what you got” (Thomas 2011).<sup>28</sup> Tony narrates the process with casualness. It's not something to get hung up on or get tweaky about. Although basic equalization in either the mixing or mastering steps could have reduced the tape hiss and sounds of foot tapping, they remain. Their presence suggests again that Tony digs the sound that he captures. The project sounds right to him.

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<sup>28</sup> Tom Turino, writing about field recordings, insists that regardless of how natural and transparent ethnographic recordings may sound, they are still the product of “recording, mixing, and editing processes” and that “the people directing these processes have a crucial role in shaping high fidelity music” (Turino 2008:68). This is certainly the case in Tony's field recordings. In creating high-fidelity music, Tony mixes for liveness; he mediates sounds to represent a moment as he remembers or imagines it to have happened. It's an aesthetic that celebrates the liveness that Tony believes inheres in first-takes. It reflects musical skills honed and confidence gained in live performance.

In a way, Tony is creating a local sound. Some researchers have connected local sounds to sound technologies in provocative ways. Writing about an Apache rock band struggling to reach broader audiences but stuck with frustratingly cheap and limited sound equipment, David Samuels writes, “The sound of a band marks its locality—can mark it *as* local. And if you sound local, it’s hard to accumulate the kind of engagements that will eventually allow you to sound less local” (Samuels 2004: 222). In the case of Samuels’s musicians, the sounds created by cheap, lousy equipment—from instruments to PA systems to recording equipment—mark bands as being *local*, in a negative sense in which “local” signifies poor, marginal, and rural lives. Samuels reminds us that the sounds of musicians—in this case, a matter of technologies rather than performance (although the two are intertwined)—are socially significant. These sounds, mediated through whatever technologies are available, can make things like class audible. These sounds suggest the kinds of recording studios and equipment that people do or don’t have access too, which is often a matter of capital. They suggest the kinds of playback equipment they use and its limits. (Does Tony have a subwoofer? If he did, would he have lessened some of the boomier foot stomps?) However, while Samuels’s musicians desperately sought to transcend a local sound, Tony’s recordings cultivate and embrace the local. Using dated equipment makes them sound profoundly local, and this is exactly what Tony wants. Field recordings sound local for Old-time musicians in East Tennessee. A Fostex sounds local. The acoustics of a parlor sound local. It sounds right to him.

At the end of the day, sounding local and live in these particular ways distinguishes Tony’s project in the Old-time scene. As new forms of professionalization emerge and hi-fi recordings proliferate, partially through crowdfunding campaigns, Tony’s recordings are decidedly unprofessional and lo-fi. They sound different and distinct. And these differences are



meaningful. Tony's projects repurpose field recordings; instead of documenting some cultural other, he transforms them into a means of self-representation. Even as he creates these field recordings, they feed back into the tradition of East Tennessee that Tony invents, documents, narrates, performs, and sustains. Riffing on almost a century of field recording in the region, Tony offers listeners an encounter with yet one more profoundly Appalachian instance of "unmediated creativity"—the liveness of a parlor jam among friends (Ardery 1998). He documents creativity that is live and allows listeners to listen into moments of intimate music making in domestic spaces. The recordings are not perfect. But that is part of their story.

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I'm listening to the final track on Tony, Charlie, and Jack's album. Tony's smooth baritone voice, a confident, radio voice, enters in from the right headphone, "Charlie, we've had a good session here with brother Jack."

"Yes we have," Charlie McCarroll responds from closer in.

"Right here at Jack's wonderful, beautiful home," Tony states, locating the speakers.

"Up on the mountain here," Charlie adds.

Tony asks Jack, "What's the name of this ridge, Jack?"

From my left headphone, Jack's husky voice, weakened by his illness offers up the vernacular place name, "Well, they used to call it Sawbriar Ridge."

Tony repeats the name, "Sawbriar Ridge. All right. Yeah." Tony strums a D chord and then a G. "Let's close out with a good gospel, okay?"

Tony attempts to kick the tune off, flatpicking a standard introduction for a tune in the key of G. He flubs a note on the G string, creating a choked metallic noise. "If I can kick it off," he laughs and tries again. This time he makes it through and Charlie's fiddle and Jack's guitar

stumble with a pleasing looseness into “Life’s Railway to Heaven.”

**Conclusion:**

*The Great Southern Fiddlers Convention  
The Lindsay Street Hall, Chattanooga, Tennessee  
Afternoon of March 27, 2010*

Musicians sit in small jam circles, scattered around the small quarter-acre lawn just to the side of the Lindsay Street Hall—the old brick church turned event space on Martin Luther King Boulevard in Chattanooga. The syncopated, staccato sound of the taps on buckdancer Thomas Maupin’s shoes pops out over the general din of outdoor jam sessions and city sounds. One jam sets up next to a little tent where a vendor sells tie-dye shirts. Trippy, vibrant greens, reds, and blues wave in the spring breeze just over the shoulder of Charlie McCarroll, contrasting with the muted browns and olives of his wide-collared plaid shirt and the severe, black cowboy hat atop his head. Charlie hunches over his fiddle, leaning into the music. Jack Sandifer passed away a little less than a year ago, but Charlie and Tony, who sits with his Martin dreadnought guitar in hand just to Charlie’s right, still get together to make music. Their friend, folklorist and banjo player, Bobby Fulcher, joins them today. At seventy-five, Charlie’s one of the oldest contestants this year. His father Jimmy McCarroll was a champion fiddle and banjo contestant at the 1920s versions of this fiddlers’ convention. Musicians pass by, and those who recognize Charlie linger and listen to him rip through family pieces.

An hour or so later inside the venue, event organizer Matt Downer picks up his carnival barker-style megaphone and calls Charlie McCarroll to the stage to compete in the fiddle contest. Charlie takes the stage with his accompanists Tony and Bobby in tow. They play the “Peacock Rag,” a piece that Grand Ole Opry great Arthur Smith recorded in 1940. Chubby Wise, the bluegrass great and the fiddler largely responsible for the ubiquity of the “Orange Blossom

Special,” has inspired Charlie’s performance. During our chats on the phone, Charlie has told me about how much he digs Chubby Wise’s playing. The piece is a hot one and would be solid fodder at most fiddle contests. Charlie plays it with his characteristic speed and the same playful timing that marks his father’s music. He nails it, but doesn’t get a ribbon. Perhaps it wasn’t the right vintage for the judges’ taste.

A bit like Charlie’s rendering of the “Peacock Rag,” Tony’s field recordings don’t quite connect with the broader currents in the Old-time scene. Tony’s recordings nail down beautiful pieces and intimate moments of music making from a family’s repertoire, yet they fail to connect with—much less reach—the ears of most Old-time listeners. Perhaps the sonics are too challenging. Or maybe the repertoire is too eclectic. Or maybe Tony doesn’t have access to the mainstream Old-time scene, a scene that by all accounts should be digging the kind of project he produces. Even though he’s rooted in the rich Old-time traditions of East Tennessee, Tony approaches the larger scene as an outsider of sorts. Of course, Tony may be less interested in appealing to some broader Old-time audience than he is in selling albums to local fans and tourists. Even if they exist on periphery of the scene, Tony’s field recordings expand our sense of what recording among contemporary Old-time musicians sound like and who makes them. In contrast, many of the clients at Joe DeJarnette’s Studio 808a have better access to, and a clearer sense of, what’s in vogue: they are regulars at festivals and camps, maintain a presence on social media, and, often, organize successful crowdfunding campaigns over Facebook to secure funding for their recording projects. Against that backdrop, Tony’s story offers a critical reminder that there’s a whole world of Old-time music making beyond the Old-time festival and camp scene.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> To be fair, Joe DeJarnette is involved with Old-time worlds far beyond the festivals and camps as well. Local, working class musicians, representing long standing traditions, have found his studio to be welcoming place to record their music.

As different as the recording projects coming from the live room of Studio 808a and Jack Sandifer's living room may be, a quest for close, live sounds and a sense of the intimate sociality behind the music drive projects made at both sites. We've encountered two very different ways of engaging with a broader tradition of sounding live in Old-time recordings. There's Joe's ability to finesse bleed to place listeners in the thick of tight sessions. Then there's Tony's concern with capturing the spirit and fellowship of music made among friends in a living room. In both cases, sounding live and sounding close are ways to recall and celebrate the rich relationships that form around and give rise to the music. Whether these recordings are created with state-of-the-art technologies or dated four-track recorders, these artists engage and interpret a tradition of making live sounding recordings that shapes the genre.



*Figure 25 (above): Charlie McCarroll holds his friends dog after a jam at the Rocky Top General Store, Harriman, Tennessee, 14 June 2011. (photograph by author)*

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION: “FILLING IN THE GAPS”

### **Auditory Time Travel**

“Okay, let’s try that,” announces sound engineer and specialist in the arcane techniques of wax cylinder recording, Martin Fisher, as he stands behind Matt Downer and Clark Williams. “Just kind of lean over again. . .” He takes the two by the shoulders, squats down, eyeballs their alignment with the large, thin metal cone that blossoms inches away from Matt’s face. “. . . Like this.” He adjusts them, pulling them closer together until their heads are barely six inches apart and centered in front of the cone. “It’s directional,” he tells them about the cone that will capture and transmit their sonic energy through a diaphragm, into a needle, and onto a wax cylinder. “It’s *very* directional,” he adds, reminding them about this pre-electric sound technology that Thomas Edison invented in 1888. Like the other early recording technologies that captured the first decade of the genre, this 1906 wax cylinder recorder offers no editing options. Through this old machine, Matt and Clark’s sounds will be split and fixed in the grooves of wax. The recording will be imminently live and intimately face-to-face. Therefore it’s important that they nail their take not only from a performance aspect, but also from a technological one.

“Tell me when you’re ready,” Martin instructs, clinching between his teeth a little rubber tube for blowing bits of wax off the cylinder. The end of the tube extends from the index and middle fingers of his right hand like a cigarette. Matt with his fiddle and Clark with his guitar continue to lean in a bit awkwardly towards each other and the horn, navigating a very tight space for music making. A twinge of excitement ripples through the room at this moment—just

before the drop of a needle initiates the recording. “Ready,” Matt responds. “Okay,” murmurs Martin as he lowers a lever with his left hand. The lever brings the needle down onto the wax cylinder.

“Buddy, there’ll be a hot time in the old town tonight. Clark, let’s go,” Matt announces, his face nearly swallowed in the cone, before he begins this piece that Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers recorded for Columbia Records in 1929. They start playing, their physical energy transformed into sound waves by their instruments. The horn captures these sounds waves, funneling them to a focal point at the narrowest point of the horn, where a mica diaphragm transduces the sonic energy into motions. The diaphragm pushes the recording needle in and out, translating their energy into freshly cut grooves on the spinning cylinder.

They play on. The needle works its way to the left of the cylinder—imagine the slow, mechanical march of a typewriter in reverse, but glassy smooth. Martin, who’s holding the rubber hose in his left hand now, blows thin ribbons of wax off as they unfurl from the cylinder. This ensures the cleanest possible recording. For better or worse, the musicians mix their own sounds, leaning in, lifting an instrument closer to the horn, pulling back to let the other be heard more clearly. Aside from the way the horn reflects their sounds back at them with a tinny echo—a sign that they are playing loud enough to be captured—there is no way for the musicians to monitor their performance. This kind of recording session is unquestionably live.

*Playback:*

*An ethereal, pulsating treble hiss of surface noise floats above the sound of Matt’s fiddle. The harsher, grittier sounds of his powerful attack and steel strings are warmed up and mellowed out. The snappy changes in his bow direction are somewhat smoother, less crunchy—the diaphragm only being so sensitive to the sonic energy. Sitting just behind Matt’s shoulder,*

*the guitar is more or less audible, depending on whether Matt's body blocks its sound waves as he leans in to sing. Unlike the sustained tones of the fiddle or voice, the pitch of Clark's bass notes—staccato bass runs, sharply played with a pick on a punchy, small body guitar—warble around a pitch center. Little pinpoints of bassy low end, they spring up above the ubiquitous surface hiss. In some weird way—perhaps a trick of the mind—the guitar sounds more woody through this acoustic recording technique. Matt's singing voice and accent, both of which he has cultivated to sound like the voices he's heard on old commercial recordings, sounds, unsurprisingly, a lot like those old voices. Through the magic of the cylinder, he sounds right to Old-time aficionados of oldness.*

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### **Lingering Questions**

“You wonder,” Matt Downer tells me, “when you hear those wax cylinder recordings of, like, John Carson or Riley and Gid— stuff like that, *I wonder what those guys really sounded like?*” Each of the players he names are canonical recording artists. In fact, John Carson made one of the earliest recording in the genre in 1923. Players who listen hard think hard about this music. Sustained, intense listening practices form feedback loops with embodied music making. Versions of Matt Downer's question— *I wonder what those guys really sounded like?*—pop up in conversations about the music with players who listen hard. They're inescapable in a scene where extraordinary effort is made to bring an old two- or three-minute recording into the performing body and into the social worlds of jam sessions, bands, and festivals. They're inescapable in a genre that has weathered the loss of nearly all the old master players. Matt's question strikes at the existential core of the music: as they listen to old recordings,

contemporary expert listeners and players wonder if the music has fundamentally changed over time, and if they sound at all like the older players might have. *Is Old-time still Old-time?*

These oldness-oriented connoisseur players have no apparent way to know how they really stack up to the musicians on old 78s or field recordings. There's no real way, it seems, to know if they are getting it right. It's not like the relationships with older masters, when an aspiring player could have the older player tell her whether or not she was getting the right sound. Now, other players might praise a rendition of an old piece, but it's not the same, and questions linger. When one listens hard to old recordings of this music, the sounds—scratches, hisses, pops, resonances—of old technology bleed into the performance, making it difficult to distinguish where one starts and the other begins. How does one disentangle an old sounded performance from the sonic artifacts of the particular media? Sometimes fiddles on old recordings have an astounding resonance; was this created by the sound of the instrument, the sound of old technology amplifying a particular frequency, or some combination of the two? These kinds of questions raise others, like the more detail-oriented questions about technique, bowing direction, and earlier instrument setups. Old recordings invite speculation, imagination, and creativity. They also invite experiments with old technologies, as players like Matt and Clark try to reconcile the sounds of their own playing with the sounds fixed on old recordings, that they are working to bring to life.

### **Mediating the Self as Old**

The mystical liveness of making these old recordings is part of the appeal.<sup>1</sup> For Old-time players who make recordings on old recording technologies like the wax cylinder or 78 (and it's

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<sup>1</sup> Wax cylinder recordings require players to play live and loud. Players describe it as a sensorially rich experience, as they hear their music vibrating the cone. I can't help but observe a peculiar twist. It's worth recalling how absent bodies and death haunted Edison's wax cylinder at the time of its invention in the late 1800s. Sound studies scholar



not nearly as uncommon as it might seem), the experience of making the recording and listening back enriches and challenges their understanding of their music.<sup>2</sup> Lyle Werner, a mid-20s, New Orleans-based, reformed crust-punk turned professional fiddler and busker, has recorded wax cylinders on an original Edison studio recorder and on 78 RPM discs with his band, the Levee Toppers. He also listens hard to the old stuff. Like Matt Downer, Lyle found the experience instructive and provocative. He also found it deeply confusing. Reflecting on the ways that the technology's limits have shaped his band's performance, he explains that they've led to more enunciated singing, a staccato attack on the fiddle, and a louder overall performance. Lyle describes the recording session as a dense sensory experience: "You can sense the vibration of

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Jonathan Sterne describes the moment when technologies of preservation were transforming culture and everyday lives of Americans: "Recording was the product of a culture that had to learned to can and embalm, to preserve the bodies of the dead so that they could continue to perform a social function after life. The nineteenth century's battle against decay offered a way to explain sound recording" (2003:292). Not unlike the "chemical transformation" in the canning of food, sound recording enabled a "practical transformation" of sound into matter. Both then and now, recording "bears the residual traces of late-Victorian death culture" (Sterne 2003:293, 291). With the advent of recording technology, these late Victorians encountered a moment of schizophonia: the voice was split from "the living and self-aware body" (2003:290). Sound recordings, like embalming, would preserve the voice after the body had turned to dust, becoming "a resonant tomb, offering the exteriority of the voice with none of its interior self-awareness." Ironically, the very technology that "bears the residual traces of late-Victorian death culture" comes to be a creative and imaginative labor, as old time musicians fill the resonant tomb of old recordings with pulsing life (Sterne 2003:293, 291). This was also the era when ethnologists and folklorists began using these technologies (see Literature Review for a more detailed overview of field recording practices and histories).

<sup>2</sup> While Matt's album may seem like a quirky, one-off novelty project to outsiders, a number of other expert contemporary Old-time players are seeking answers to similar questions and experimenting with wax cylinder recordings and other older sound technologies. Detroit-based professional fiddler Aaron Jonah Lewis, for instance, recorded a full album titled "Recordings on 'Honest-To-Goodness' Wax Cylinders," with his band Roochie Tooachie and the Ragtime Shepherd Kings. In like manner, Bill and the Belles, an Old-time novelty trio from Johnson City, Tennessee, and the Down Hill Strugglers, a throwback old-school Old-time trio from Brooklyn, have made recording on wax cylinders. These seem to be as much projects of self-understanding as commercial endeavors: players recognize that the market for commercial digitized copies of wax cylinder recordings is limited at best, due to the wooly sonics of these recordings.

This kind of experimentation and curiosity is not limited to experts and professional either; the technology captivates amateur and hobby Old-time musicians well. For the last decade or so, recording engineer Martin Fisher has recorded dozens of Old-time musicians, from casual players to experts, on his wax cylinder recorder at Breaking Up Winter, an annual Old-time music event outside of Nashville. Among these is Chattanooga David Varnell, a retiree, a prize-winning up-picking banjo player, and a key participant at jams in the city over the last decade. "I thought it would be interesting to hear how the sound of my banjo and voice would compare to some of the old early recordings," he tells me, suggesting that listening habits generate a desire for contemporary players to hear themselves mediated through old technologies so that they can compare their sounds to the old sounds" (David Varnell, email message to the author. December 12, 2017).

the aluminum or whatever metal they're using for the bell. You can really hear this tinny, echoey—I don't know—it's like yelling into a metal hallway or something. Yeah, like if you were stuck in an air duct, and you started screaming for help. It might be comparable to that" (Werner 2017).

In the old technology recording session, Lyle recorded Tennessee fiddler John Sharp's "Three Way Hornpipe," a piece that WWI hero Alvin York recorded Sharp playing in 1949. York made the recording on a home disc cutter. That 78 RPM home recording has circulated into the broader world of Old-time, crackling and hissing its way onto range of newer media—a 1984 County Records LP and cassette, bootleg cassettes, mp3s, and a recent remastered digital reissue. Lyle snagged the tune out of this circulatory flow and pinned it back down onto a 78. When he heard his recording played back for him, he was confused and shocked. As he listened to his sonic double, mediated through lo-fidelity old technology, and imagined how that phantom fiddler (himself) might have bowed the tune, it didn't line up with how he actually *played* the tune. He recalls, "I heard it back. I was like, 'If I didn't know how I bowed that, I would've come to a completely different conclusion about how this fiddler might have been bowing this tune.' Because there's something about the record that, I don't know, it just adds a different layer to the music. It makes you sound like . . ."

Lost in an effort to translate the experience of sound into speech, he trails off and finds the thread again, explicating a deeply personal experience with sound and taste:

What it is, is that when you reduce [the] resolution of sound, your ear has to fill in the details, and so your imagination plays this role in reconstructing an image of what the music actually is. So your brain has to fill in gaps, and your imagination plays a role in reconstructing what the song should be. And your imagination is connected to your own musical ideals—your musical ideal individually and also your community musical ideals. So I think that there's this process happening in which the music community pays, generally speaking, a lot of interest in these compelling old recordings. We all hear

similar things in the recordings, and we all kind of get similarly mesmerized by these qualities. (Werner 2017)

Indeed, many players demonstrate mastery through moving performances that translate old, low-resolution sources in high definition liveness (and sometimes offness). The work is full of possibilities. It demands that players fill in gaps of information creatively and tastefully, balancing the old information with personal and communal tastes. Lyle concludes:

Because these old source recordings have something missing in them means that, collectively, we're all sort of filling in the blanks. It's not just that we're interested in elements of the recordings that are there. Maybe part of it is that we're all listening to these empty spaces in the recordings and filling them, or imagining that there's certain things in there that aren't. Our imaginations are kind of working along similar lines. (Werner 2017)

Making a wax cylinder allows players to fill some of these empty spaces, to mediate themselves into the blank spaces.

Making a wax cylinder, according to my consultants, is less of an exercise in nostalgia than it is an effort to create a reference point, rooted in bodily experience, for listening and imagining more fully what might have been happening in those earlier recordings. It is a chance to mediate oneself—to create a sound object that can be compared to the revered sound objects produced at some earlier moment on similar equipment with similar constraints.

At the heart of the project is an effort to conjure up and connect with the liveness of the original point of creation. “It made me think that they were just guys playing music,” Matt tells me, arriving at an answer to his question about what the old guys actually sounded like. It's a strikingly different lesson than Lyle's, and a reminder of the intense subjectivity at play in this listening culture. Perhaps these often fetishized recorded performances were made by regular players—some of whom were exceptionally skilled and some of whom were not. Maybe they

were *just guys playing music*. Perhaps we'll never know. Listening hard to this music is a study in possibilities and limits.

### **A Tag**

We end up not too far from where we started in the 1920s, with Chattanooga's old fiddlers experimenting with then-new sound technologies—radio and 78 RPM records. Their sounds were split, transmitted into the air or fixed in grooves of shellac. Either way, those sounds were let loose in the world. And there they've traveled for almost a century. A genre emerged, built around powerful music and entangled with ideas about the past and whiteness. The lived experiences of the musicians told a different, more complicated story. We watched how listening to these old sounds led Matt Downer to reimagine an old fiddlers' convention as a space of participation and experimentation. Listening, remembering, and inventing led Don Sarrell to explore new possibilities for Old-time banjo. Listening to Oscar Overturf led Bob Townsend to reimagine a local sound and create a new relational and musical groove on the Cumberland Plateau. We tracked players like Shay Garriock working to bring sounds into their bodies, emulating the smallest of details. And we listened as Old-time musicians worked to make recordings that would quiver with liveness and intimacy.

These chapters have told stories about a genre, performances, and relationships mediated *by and through* sound recordings. Along the way, I have foregrounded the role of sound technology in Old-time music making. I have shown the ways that communities and social relationships form around older recordings. I have also revealed the imaginative and creative listening and learning practices that emerge as expert players engage with these older commercial and field recordings. In doing so, I have attempted to push conversations about Old-

time music beyond discourses of revival and authenticity. This dissertation offers an approach to studying a form of expressive culture deeply entangled with technology.

Increasingly, this music is about the skill one develops when translating an old recording with lousy sound quality into a rich performance that can provide personal pleasure or integrate easily into jams with others. It's about a quest for on-ness. Intimate forms of listening are the vehicle. The ear, which is a figurative way to talk about these exquisitely skilled musical bodies and imaginations, is central to Old-time. Technologies that allow circulation, playback, and sonic dissection are also central to the music . . . and have been for nearly a century.

As the generation of source musicians passes, the face-to-face visit with the old master recedes into memory. It transforms into story. It becomes a lick on the banjo. The sonic traces of the visit linger on a reel of tape, a cassette on a shelf, in a hard drive. It sits there waiting—full of beauty, artistry, possibility, and limits. The work of listening and learning is there for those who are willing. Listening hard becomes a form of deep participation. And the present overlaps with the past.

## **APPENDIX 1: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review divides into four parts that reflect the trajectory of the dissertation. Part 1 tracks with the broader themes of scholarship on Old-time music and narrows to consider ethnographic work on the genre. Conversations about authenticity and revival feature prominently in that literature. Part 2 provides an overview of ethnomusicological methods of research as performance and discussions of mastery and expert performances. Part 3 overviews thinking on sound that has shaped this project. Because recording processes and field recordings play so critical a role in my research and in the Old-time community, Part 4 explores the technologies, histories, circulation, and problems that emerge from the production of field recordings. Thinking in these four realms allows me to approach the musical experiences of Old-time listening experts with sensitivity to the genre's emerging history, a fine-grained attention to the creative labor of learning, and a basic understanding of the sound technologies and the field recordings that provide much fodder for learning and listening.

### **Part 1: On Old-time**

Many other scholars have found the genre of Old-time to be a rich site for study. For thinking critically about the genre and its history, I turn to the work of Archie Green (1965), Patrick Huber (2008), Bill Malone (see Malone and Stricklin 2003 and Malone 2010, 2011), Karl Miller (2010) and Tony Russell (1970) to understand the complex ways in which record companies and performers constructed a genre and, in doing so, created a racialized, commercial commodity that hummed with rurality and whiteness. Huber's (2008) attention to the experiences of southern laborers and millworkers in the 1920s and 1930s offers a provocative way to think about the world of the early music makers and their audiences. His attention to the musicians' and millworkers' experience of urbanism and the accumulation of capital through

new forms of industrial labor challenges me to consider the modern and cosmopolitan milieu that gave rise to the genre in the 1920s American South. Likewise, Miller's (2010) argument about the ways that the early recording industry racialized and segregated sounds, and his framing of Southern commercial field recording sessions within a broader global commercial project, leads me to think about Old-time in a new light as unnaturally whitened and as part of a global network of circulation. Tony Russell's (1970) book explores the overlapping worlds of black and white musicians in the American South around the time that the commercial recording industry began. As only a record collector could, he delivers a rich assessment of these early recordings. Drew Beisswenger (2002), Bob Cox (2007) Jocelyn Neal (2009), Kinney Rorrer (1992), Gene Wiggins (1986), and Charles Wolfe (1998, 1977) offer biographies of key recording artists and performers within the genre and provide rich insights into the ways individual performers navigated their worlds and constructed sounds and images on stage and through sound recordings. Harry Bolick (2015), Simon Bronner (1987), Joyce Cauthen (1989), Cece Conway (1995), Wayne Daniel (1990), Erynn Marshall (2006), Gerald Milnes (1999), Jeff Titon (2001), and Stephen Wade (2012) have explored historical and regional repertoires, performers, and musical techniques in Old-time music. This line of inquiry has also resulted in transcriptions of regional music and discographies of early commercial recording sessions.

### **On (and Against) Revival**

Another thread of literature has tracked the "revival" in American folk music and in Old-time music. Neil Rosenberg's (1993) collection of reflections on the broader, mid-century folk revival combines with Bob Cantwell's (1997) meditation on the revival moment to reveal the broader cultural and social dynamics shaping these musical quests for something that U.S. revivalists perceived to be more authentic. Rosenberg (1993) offers the term "named-system

revivals” to describe smaller revivals, like the Old-time music revival, that followed the midcentury folk-song revival. Contemporary Old-time musicians negotiate a changing canon of older recordings and players, and my project owes debts to the work of other scholars who have described these canonization processes in American vernacular musics. Historian Benjamin Filene (2000) describes the diverse actors (e.g., government officials, folklorists, record companies, musicians) and the cultural interventions that provided revivalists with a canon of roots musician to revere and study. Both Filene (2000) and Cantwell (1997) describe critical processes of canon formation in related music forms through the ways artists were represented (or represented themselves) and through the circulation of reissues and anthologies of recordings.

Closer to my research site, there has been considerable work on the Old-time revival. The highly influential revivalist band The New Lost City Ramblers that formed in 1958 in New York City has been the focus of scholarship that engages authenticity and questions about revivals (Allen 2010, Gura 2000, Tilton 2010). In his history of the group, folklorist Ray Allen (2010) questions the role that the New Lost City Ramblers played in the communities that traditionally gave rise to the music; he raises questions about whether the term “revival” accurately describes what actually took place. Folklorist Steve Zeitlin (1999) describes “delimited” public folklore programming approaches that favored local traditions and musicians over other artists (e.g., revivalists). Both Michael Scully (2008) and Ray Allen (2010) offer blow-by-blow accounts of the debates and tensions between Old-time revivalists, folklorists, and cultural gatekeepers.

Like Allen, Mark Slobin (1983) questions the utility of “revival” as a theoretical tool used to describe the ways that musical forms gain new traction within musical communities (Livingston 1999). Ethnomusicologists David Wood (2015) and James Ruchala (2011) raise questions about how useful models of revival are in the music, pointing to the overlap and



layering of those previously musical “insiders” and “outsiders.” Ruchala provocatively suggests that contemporary Old-time might be better thought of as a “postrevival” music (2011). My conversations with contemporary musicians, both those representing emplaced traditions and those representing “revivalist” ways of making music, suggest that the community is far more complex and intertwined than the binaries of insider/outsider, “true vine”/revivalist, or authentic/inauthentic would suggest. Thinking about Old-time as a “postrevival” music opens up new possibilities and lines of inquiry.

A focus on emplaced traditions and revival limits research possibilities in a vibrant music. The idea of an “Old-time music revival” suggests that there was time a when the music existed in some purer, more discrete state. It leads to an essentialized, leveling concept of a diverse set of musical practices. Although “revival” as an explanatory model can be helpful for general explanations of broad trends in a musical community, I hear much more happening in Old-time. In the end, the term “revival” obscures more interesting facets and ironies of this musical form than it reveals. It obscures the fact that the music continued to be played just beyond the scholar’s earshot.

For my purposes, understandings of revival also unhelpfully minimize the role of technology in the music’s early formation as a commodity. I am interested in recovering the ways in which Old-time has been imbricated with sound technology since the commercial recording industry developed the genre in the 1920s. Thus, I treat Old-time as an emergent community forming in circulation, making new sounds out of old sounds, and tied to technology throughout its existence. I am interested in the ways that sound recording technologies, institutions, and commercial interests mediate the music and the idea of place in the contemporary moment.

Following ethnomusicologist David Novak (2013), I am curious to know how our understanding might shift if we think of Old-time music as culture forming through the uneven interplay of circulation and feedback. To approach Old-time in these terms is to acknowledge and foreground its relationship to technology, especially sound recording technology. Departing from the notion that circulation of media occurs *between* cultures, ethnomusicologist Novak (2013) argues that circulation and feedback constitute and mediate culture. He writes: “Local musical cultures have not disappeared. But they are constantly reproduced and remediated in dialogue with other new projects of listening, performance, emplacement, and selfhood” (2013:21). The local musical cultures that constitute Old-time are subject to reproduction and remediation as they flow out into the broader world and, at times, feed back into the communities that gave rise to them.

### **Ethnographies of Old-time**

Although these works play an important role in my project, I am particularly interested in the ways that ethnographic projects have engaged the genre. Ethnomusicologist Tom Turino’s treatment of Old-time, for instance, opens space for an understanding of contemporary Old-time music as a participatory form of music that values high-fidelity recordings. He presents contemporary Old-time music as a participatory form of music that, in its revival forms, “was deeply and alternatively American” (2008: 159). He describes the contemporary Old-time music revival as a middle class cultural cohort, defining the term “cultural cohort” as “a social group that forms around the activity itself” (Turino 2008:107). As a cultural cohort, the community exists in opposition to broader capitalist cultural formation. Working with Peircean semiotics, Turino argues that Old-time music indexes rurality and notions of tight-knit community. Musicians embrace the music and its symbolic meaning, creating an alternative community to

mainstream capitalist society. Turino's theoretically provocative work uses Old-time music to argue larger points about participatory music and its meanings. Focusing on Old-time music as a particular site of affectively potent musical experience, Turino (2008) helpfully introduces the affective experience of Csikszentmihályi's "flow" into conversations about the experience musicians have while playing the music. Focused on the experiential dimensions of fiddlers' conventions, Andy Woolf's (1990) dissertation accounts for the affective experiences and intimate sociality of these events.

Since 2003, ethnomusicologists have written three dissertations exploring the Old-time music community. These dissertations approach the community through the lens of revival, assuming that there is some identifiable tradition that musicians are reviving. Building on Mark Slobin's notion of a "diasporic musical affinity group" (Slobin 1993), Amy Wooley describes the contemporary Old-time scene in anthropological terms as a "21st century utopian community" maintained through "ritual enactment of the sacred texts (musical repertoires)" and "resistance to commodification" (2003: ix). James Ruchala (2011) traces the history and revival of Surry County, N.C., Old-time music, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork to explore the contemporary Surry County scene. Ruchala tracks a history of emplaced revitalization and broader circulation—Round Peak style Old-time, or things called that, dominate jam sessions throughout the community. He reveals complex, overlapping and entangled groups of revivalist and local musicians. Dave Wood's (2015) recent dissertation asks what the categories of insider and outsider mean among practitioners, and how such distinctions shape the affective and cognitive experiences of players performing the music. His study blends psychological and cognitive methods to discover a quantifiable difference in experience.

## Part 2: On Musical Performance as Research and Mastery

Performance as research approaches, informed by ethnomusicology, shape this dissertation. Beginning with Mantle Hood's concept of "bi-musicality"—the argument that scholars of music should acquire basic music skills in an unfamiliar music (1960)—ethnomusicologists have valued the scholar's musical learning. John Baily delivers a concise history of the concept and makes a clear case for the scholar's learning to perform as a productive research technique that provides deeper access to musical worlds (2001). Baily develops this line of argument further with his concept of "intermusability"—"where 'inter' refers to 'more than one,' and 'musability' is the contraction of musical and ability" (2008:132). My study under Paul Berliner complements my reading of his work on Shona mbira and learning improvisation in jazz; his presence solidifies my understanding of the method and value of performance as a research method (1994, 1993). Jeff Titon frames the role of learning and making music as a critical part of fieldwork: "The new fieldwork leads us to ask what it is like for a person (ourselves included) to make and to know music as lived experience" (2008:25). In this dissertation, I engage Old-time music as a lived experience. The path is well trod by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists (Fox 2004, Gray 2013, Rahaim 2012, Samuels 2004, Tang 2005).

The concept of mastery invites approaches from multiple disciplines. In his classic *Art Worlds*, sociologist Howard Becker (2008 [1982]) understands a concept like mastery only in the context of community in which aesthetics is a kind of community activity. According to Becker, things like mastery, aesthetics, and taste are negotiated within artistic communities. Becker also invites me to consider the layers and network that make up this artistic community. Thus, I consider multiple types of mastery in the art world that is this musical community. Ruth

Finnegan helpfully extends Becker's concept of "art worlds" into amateur "musical worlds," communities with distinct values, "shared understandings and practices, modes of production and distribution, and the social organisation of their collective musical activities" (1989: 32).

Ethnomusicologists have dealt with questions of mastery in a number of ways. Paul Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Expression* (1994), and especially his extended attention to the cultivation of masterful improvisatory skills and knowledge of a tradition, provides a model for thinking through the paths that communities create and that musicians follow toward musical mastery. Recent works by Aaron Fox (2004), Lila Ellen Gray (2013), and Ryan Skinner (2015) have examined similar questions about what constitutes masterful performances and have used meaningful, masterful performances as avenues to address larger cultural, social, and political issues at play in the communities that give context to the performance. Gray, for instance, interrogates what constitutes masterful and affectively powerful performances in Fado, untangling the ways that singers and musicians draw on memory, performance, communities of listeners, and places to craft masterful performances of Portuguese *saudade*. Fox, in turn, tunes into the ways that masterful country performances give voice to a particular working-class identity. And Skinner describes the ways that musical motions and ethics come into play as Malian musicians navigate and articulate their multiple identities as cosmopolitan citizens. Counterbalancing these theory-driven explorations of mastery, Henry Glassie's attention to the aesthetics and ethics of artistic communities offers a model for sensitive ethnographic work that strives to understand how communities create and invest meaning in masterful performances (2006, 1999). Glassie's relationship-driven ethnographies invite interlocutors to craft their own theories of aesthetics.

### Part 3: On Sound

The third section draws on my particular interest in Old-time as a sounded community and my engagement with the field of sound studies, particularly my interest in the role of sound technologies. I push conversations about Old-time music to carefully consider sound. My attention to sound technologies and recording processes reflects the community's increasing reliance on early commercial and field recordings as sources of musical knowledge and aesthetics. It also invites consideration of the ways that musicians, concerned with old sounds, navigate contemporary studios and utilize sound technologies. Towards this end, my project draws from diverse works in sound studies.

In particular, my reading of composer and theorist R. Murray Schafer's foundational work *Our Sonic Environment and the Soundscape: The Tuning of the World* (1994) puts me in conversation with a number of sound studies scholars and provides a critical springboard and vocabulary for thinking about contemporary Old-time music. As I work with Schafer's concepts of "soundscape," "lo-fi" and "hi-fi" soundscapes, and "schizophonia," I deal with foundational concepts in sound studies (see chapter 1 for a definition of schizophonia and its influence). The widely used notion of soundscape aims most fundamentally at "a total appreciation of the acoustic environment" and recasts a sounded world in much the same way that studies of landscape examine the interplay of nature and culture (1994: 4). Schafer describes two types of soundscapes. First, there is the hi-fi: "The hi-fi soundscape is one in which discrete sounds can be heard clearly because of the low ambient noise level. The country is generally more hi-fi than the city; the night more than day; ancient times more than modern. In the hi-fi soundscape, sounds overlap less frequently; there is perspective—foreground and background" (1994: 43). Schafer's "hi-fi soundscape" suggests face-to-face interactions and a moment in which humans

are less alienated from each other and the world around them. In contrast, in the “lo-fi soundscape individual acoustic signals are obscured in an overdense population of sounds. The pellucid sound . . . is masked by broad-band noise. Perspective is lost” (1994: 43). For Schafer, the lo-fi soundscape is a result and condition of the Industrial Revolution and the Electric Revolution. It suggests a condition of ecological and social alienation. Although David Samuels et. al (2010) point out the “romantic materialist environmentalism” strain in Schafer’s work, he finds the concept of soundscape useful, suggesting that it “opens possibilities for anthropologists to think about the enculturated nature of sound, the techniques available for collecting and thinking about sound, and the material spaces of performance and ceremony that are used or constructed for the purpose of propagating sound” (2010:330). Although I don’t engage “soundscapes” directly in this dissertation, the linkage between sounds, fidelity, and sociality shapes my project.

Resisting Schafer’s romanticism, I find the concept of hi-fi and lo-fi soundscapes to be useful tools for thinking about Old-time and the social world that forms around it. I am not alone in engaging these concepts. In his study of second lines in New Orleans, ethnomusicologist Matt Sakakeeny offers a critically useful application of lo-fi soundscapes in his discussion of the ways that New Orleans musicians make the lo-fi soundscape meaningful (2010). Sakakeeny describes a soundscape in which second line performances create socially meaningful sounded experiences within (and because of) a lo-fi soundscape as they use an interstate overpass, buzzing with traffic, to amplify their own presence through reverberant sound. Sakakeeny usefully rereads and reworks Schafer’s soundscape. He leads me to think that my own retooling of the hi-fi and lo-fi soundscape might shed light on the curious prevalence of sound technology in this community that places a high value on sociality.

Historian Emily Thompson's (2002) helpful study of the modern soundscape and the role of sound technologies in producing a modern sound and modern listener departs from Schafer's ecological and environmental understanding of soundscape. She draws on Alain Corbin's (1998) work and defines it as "an auditory or aural landscape" (Thompson 2002:1). She continues: "Like a landscape, a soundscape is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment" (2002:1). Thompson examines the development of electroacoustic and architectural technologies that fostered "a clear, direct, nonreverberant" modern sound, reformulated the relationship between sound and space, and created new ways of being a listener. Her work offers an important perspective as I attempt to understand the listening *habitus* and the current quest among Old-time enthusiasts to recreate or reimagine how past audiences heard and felt the music (2002:3). Jonathan Sterne's (2003, 2012) work with sound technologies and media old (phonographs) and new (mp3) offers new angles to think about the ways musicians engage field recorded performances and old technologies and the meanings that those objects invite.

Sterne's work, in turn, draws my attention to the politics and aesthetics of media formats. Anthropologist Brian Larkin (2008) explores the aesthetics of media formats. His work on degraded media, particularly pirated VHS in Nigeria, opens up space for thinking about the ways that degraded or noisy media shapes the aesthetics of consumers and producers. He describes filmmakers who produce new films that are engineered to look old so that audiences, accustomed to viewing pirated and lossy films, will connect with the new productions.

Moving into the realm of record production, a number of ethnographers have found the recording studio to be an instructive ethnographic site (Feld et al. 2004, Meintjes 2003, Pandian 2015, Porcello 2005, Samuels 2004). Following their lead and their attention to language in studios and the acts of mediation at the mixing board, I am concerned with how meaningful



sounds are recorded in the Old-time community. New recordings play a critical role in establishing musicians as experts and shaping repertoires, and the processes and aesthetics molding these recordings deserve discussion alongside the recording.

#### **Part 4: On Recordings and Field Recordings**

In contemporary folklore and ethnomusicology, field recordings operate in the methodological background, documenting sounds and creating objects of our study. Field recordings feed back into contemporary Old-time performance practices in unprecedented ways. Given the prominent role of this type of recording in the community, I describe what field recordings are and have been.

This section of my literature review is divided into three sections. The first section frames the early practice of field recording, tracing its technological and cultural histories and examining the intersection with the emergent field of folklore in late nineteenth century America. I also consider some of the 1920s commercial Old-time recordings as types of field recordings that drew on folkloric discourses of authenticity. The second section surveys ethnomusicology's critical engagement with and theorization of field recordings during the world music moment of the 1990s and more recently with "World Music 2.0" (Novak 2011). The third section briefly examines the ways some Old-time musicians critique field recordings.

#### **Overview and History of Early Technologies:**

Because old recording technologies still shape the Old-time experiences of Old-time musicians, it's worth charting a brief history of early recording technology. Beginning in 1877, Edison's phonograph offered a form of sonic recordings and reproduction through the medium of wax cylinders. Developed out of telephone research, the technology utilized a "microphone diaphragm [that] could make a direct impression in a moving medium, then the impression could

make a diaphragm move in the same manner when the medium was moved to drive it, and the sound recorded as impressions would be directly listenable—reproduction” (Brock-Nannestad 2009: 153). The material of cylinders evolved from tinfoil to wax to a more durable celluloid called Blue Amberol in 1912. Wax cylinders were a preferred tool among early ethnographers (and into the 1940s) because a hand crank eliminated the need for electricity. They were “self-contained” (Brock-Nannestad 2009: 155). Permanent copper masters could be produced once cylinders were brought back to archives, allowing more permanent copies to be made (ibid.)

In 1887, Emile Berliner developed the Berliner Gramophone, based on photo engraving technology. The initial process involved an etching method on zinc records. Later, zinc records were replaced by better sounding thermoplastic records composed of “a mixture of shellac as binder material (c. 20 per cent) and slate dust as a filler (c. 80 percent), with a small amount of carbon black to avoid a grey, concrete-like look for the finished record” (ibid.) By 1900, a method of groove cutting became common for sound recording on records. In 1911, Victor developed a proprietary groove shape that made their records more durable (2009: 157). Horns were used initially for recording. Sound was reproduced through ear tubes, then horns, and then, in 1920, valves and electromagnetic drives powered speakers.

The development of home recording technologies deserves attention because home recordings have been an important source for Old-Time musicians. Beginning in 1930, microphone inputs and cutter-heads allowed consumers to record onto two types of aluminum discs—“a nitro-cellulose lacquer bonded to a very flat aluminum disc” or “or a gelatin formulation, either bonded to flimsier aluminum discs or solid” (Brock-Nannested 2009: 162). Brock-Nannested describes home recording developing as “a hobby not unlike home film-

making” (2009:158).<sup>1</sup> Between 1942 and 1947, reel to reel tape became the preferred medium for home use (2009:164). Beginning in 1962 Philips compact cassette design made home recording and field recording easier and cheaper.

### **Early Commercial Old-time Records as Field Recordings?**

The early commercial recordings of “local” artists and music for “foreign-speaking” markets deserve attention in a discussion of field recordings (Miller 2010, Gronow and Saunio 1998: 46). Karl Hagstrom Miller (2010) ties the development of race, “old-time,” and “hillbilly” categories in the 1920s U.S. to the global recording industry’s success with commercial field recording projects abroad. He notes the folkloric narrative of discovery and the discourse of “upstanding and serious folklore” that circulated around Okeh’s 1923 presentation of Fiddling John Carson (2010: 211). It is worth paying attention to this strand of the industry’s history as a kind of field recording.

Pekka Gronow and Ilpo Saunio (1998) track the development of global record markets, domestic markets for immigrant music, and the shifts from recording sessions in northern urban centers to field recordings in the American south, notably Ralph Peer’s session with Okeh in Atlanta (1923) and with Victor in Bristol (1927). In 1925 and 1926, Victor and Columbia began recording Irish and Ukrainian musicians in New York City in an effort to create “foreign-speaking” markets (1998: 46-47). Like the “foreign-speaking” market, the category of “local,” developed in the context of the global recording industry, made otherness audible. Miller defines

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<sup>1</sup> In my fieldwork, I have encountered home recorded 78s. My first mentor Charlie Acuff (1920-2013) had a collection of them. Besides recording his fiddling, he recorded neighbors and family performing all kinds of music and radio programs. He recorded music making at home, resulting in cassette tapes of informal jams. A decade ago, while doing field work, I was given a pile of home recorded discs from Sale Creek, Tennessee. They had been found in a closet. The recordings contained an eclectic mix of materials—popular songs, fiddle tunes, hymns, and novelty numbers were all mixed together. My point here is that the traces of home recording technology offer an alternate archive to those of the folklorist and ethnomusicologist. These recordings reflect different concerns, interests, and musical ways of being.

the industry's notion of local as "distinct, circumscribed space," "deeply private," and "inferior" to dominant Western forms of music (2010:178). Nevertheless, recordings of local music were central to the industry's development in the early 1900s. Miller observes the growth of the local: "By 1910, companies had established sophisticated global networks of production and distribution for their machines and phonograph records. They had recorded thousands of musicians in dozens of countries, and the quantity of 'foreign' or 'ethnic' records in their catalogues outnumbered domestic releases by a significant margin" (2010: 58). By 1920, "the local model invented in the global marketplace was coming to dominate the phonograph business within the United States" (2010: 184). Malone and Stricklin (2003) chart the development of various local musics in the U.S., including the blues with Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues," Old-Time music in 1923 with Fiddlin' John Carson's recording of the minstrel song "Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane," and Cajun music in 1928 with accordionist Joseph Falcon and guitarist and wife Cleoma Breaux Falcon "Allons a Lafayette" in New Orleans.

During the late 1920s, Okeh, Columbia, and Victor made just over 700 field recordings in the mountain south (Wolfe 2006: 1153, 1155). Both 1928 and 1929 were lucrative years for American record companies. In 1929 sound recording was a seventy-five million dollar industry, selling nearly 150 million records (Gronow 1983: 63). Recording historian Gronow's research suggests that the industry brought in seventy-million dollars in 1928 (1983: 63). These were the second and third most lucrative years during the 1920s (Gronow and Saunio 1998). During this boom period, record companies sought to expand markets, developing race records and hillbilly series such as Columbia's hillbilly "old familiar tunes" 15000-D (Malone 1997: 39). Commercial field recording was a big business.

### **A Brief Cultural History of Field Recording**

By 1936, ethnomusicologist George Herzog estimated that fieldworkers had recorded more than fourteen thousand cylinders of traditional material in North America (Brady 1999: 122). Sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne (2003) and folklorist Erika Brady (1999) have traced histories of field recording among folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and anthropologists.

Sterne locates the development of recording and sound reproduction technology in the late 1800s, when technologies of preservation were transforming culture. He explains:

“Recording was the product of a culture that had to learned to can and embalm, to preserve the bodies of the dead so that they could continue to perform a social function after life. The nineteenth century’s battle against decay offered a way to explain sound recording” (2003:292). Not unlike the “chemical transformation” in the canning of food, sound recording enabled a “practical transformation” of sound into matter. He suggests that recording, then and now, “bears the residual traces of late-Victorian death culture in the United States and the United Kingdom (and possibly elsewhere)” (2003:293, 291).

As Sterne explains, this transformation separated interior voice from the exterior body. Sterne writes of the cultural notion of a split between the voice and “the living and self-aware body” (2003:290). “The voices of the dead is a striking figure of exteriority. . . . The recording is, therefore, a resonant tomb, offering the exteriority of the voice with none of its interior self-awareness” (ibid.) Sound recording, like embalming, preserved the exteriority of the voice.

Enter field recordings in the late nineteenth century as a way to capture “the voices of dying cultures” (Sterne 2003). In a fit to “save the lore,” early American folklorists and anthropologists sought to capture the voices of groups on the fringes of a modernizing nation. With the American Folklore Society organizing in 1888 and its *Journal of American Folklore*, recording technology arrived at an opportune moment. As a tool, the wax cylinder allowed the

field worker to capture the voices of dying cultures. Karl Miller's description of the recordings of "local music" in the global recording industry as "foreign technology representing an American modernity" resonates with the perceived temporal disjuncture between the field workers and their interlocutors that Sterne highlights (Miller 2010: 169, Sterne 2003). Native American tribes, perceived to be relics from the past and doomed to extinction in a modern America, were some of the first to be recorded. Recordings were made soon after the U.S. Government instituted policies like the Dawes Act of 1887, which intended to assimilate (or eliminate) Native American communities by dividing reservation lands into personal allotments. Sterne's description of field recording as a way to preserve the voices of dying culture squares with the discourse of folklorists in the era.

Erika Brady (1999) traces the creation and circulation of cylinder field recordings as historical objects. She suggests that for many early recordists, the recording was a means to an end—the creation of a text or transcription. The text was typically considered the final object of study. Eventually, the actual sound recording came to be a thing placed in archives.<sup>2</sup> Brady notes that many early field recordings were subject to "the often mistaken theoretical assumptions and misguided personal agendas" of early folklorists and anthropologists (1999:123). She imagines the production of these field recordings as a kind of collaborative project—"a project for which both [field worker and interlocutor] could claim responsibility" (ibid.)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Although I am not detailing the development of archives as repositories for field recordings, I do recognize that they raise a host of questions about ownership and access. Anthony Seeger addresses these questions and recognizes that both ethnomusicology and archives "are inextricably part of the colonial period" (1986:66).

<sup>3</sup> Of field recording, Brady writes: "It produced an object, the wax cylinder, that was truly an impartial record of a sound event, verifiable by both performer and collector" (1999:123). I would argue that the production of a field recording is never "an impartial event" in which the recordist produces an object and subjects it to analysis. Brady's claim that the sound event is "verifiable" presumes that the field worker and participant share the same ontology of sound. Barre Tolkein's (1998) article on the Yellow Man Tapes reveals the possibilities for profound cross-cultural differences in understandings of what a recording is.

Brady highlights Joseph Fewkes's role as the first ethnologist (and trained zoologist) to make field recordings in March of 1890 (Brady 1999:53-55). Fewkes describes his field recording in thoroughly scientific terms, writing: "What specimens are to the naturalist in describing genera or species, or what sections are to the histologist in the study of cellular structure, the cylinders are to the study of language" (Fewkes 1890:268). Brady demonstrates the ways in which field workers struggled over the purpose and use of field recordings. She contributes a sense of the evolving attitudes towards field recordings: "Most fieldworkers who chose to use the phonograph generally did not do so with the objective of securing and preserving a perfectly faithful verbatim or note-perfect rendition of a single performance. The norm of word-for-word publication of texts, 'warts and all,' derives from the exigencies of much more recent research trends such as ethnopoetics, performance theory, and others in folklore and anthropology" (1999: 64).

### **Circulation, World Music, and Field Recording:**

The world music moment of the 1990s sparked a critical assessment of field recordings. As recordings were sampled on commercial recordings, their circulation generated questions about cultural ownership and intellectual property. In 1996, the *Yearbook for Traditional Music* released an issue featuring four articles about field recordings circulating in research, commercial, and legal worlds separate from their initial creation (Feld 1996, Seeger 1996, Zemp 1996). The world music moment forced scholars to realize that field recordings were never merely a scholarly production or some kind of by-product of field work.

In particular, Steven Feld's theoretical explorations of world music and field recordings have bearing on my research, even in the post-world music moment. Feld's "Notes on 'World Beat'" (1988) hints at the power dynamics that the appropriation of field recordings brings into

play. He observes a “complex traffic in sounds, money, and media . . . rooted in the nature of revitalizations through appropriation” (1988: 31). He continues: “Musical appropriation sings a double line with one voice” (ibid.) The positive line—one of admiration and respect—fits in the “roots” discourse “of reproducing and expanding ‘the tradition’” (ibid.) The second line speaks to asymmetries and fits “in a discourse of ‘rip-offs,’ of reproducing ‘the hegemonic’” (ibid.) Feld’s work with field recordings and world music examines the practice and use of field recordings among academics while extending concern to the circulation of field recordings as commodities in the large global recording industry that was thriving (and appropriating/exploiting local sounds) in the late 1980s.

In “pygmy POP,” Feld focuses on the uneven musical exchange and circulation between “colonial and post-colonial Africa” and global pop. He traces the genealogy of pygmy music from Madonna to Herbie Hancock to Leon Thomas and 1970s jazz and asks: “Doesn’t research rationalize schizophonia?” (1996: 11). Field recordings (and the researchers who produce them) introduce music (people and culture) into unexpected networks of circulation. Confronting this “critical reality,” he describes the unwieldy nature of field recordings:

The intentions surrounding a recording’s original production, however positive, cannot be controlled once a commodity is in commercial circulation. Both as tokens of academic and of marketplace authenticity, documentary field recordings have served to validate very diverse agendas, many of which were unanticipated and may now be unwelcome or distasteful to recordists or those recorded. (Feld 1996: 11)

Feld’s exploration of circulation leads him to develop a theory of “schizophonic mimesis” to describe “sounds that have been split from their sources” (1996: 13). He clarifies the term: “By ‘schizophonic mimesis’ I want to question how sonic copies, echoes, resonances, traces, memories, resemblances, imitations, duplications all proliferate histories and possibilities. This is to ask how sound recordings, split from their source through the chain of audio production,



circulation, and consumption stimulate and license renegotiations of identity.” The circulation of field recordings opens “new possibilities whereby a place and people can be recontextualized, rematerialized, and thus thoroughly reinvented” (1996:13).

Feld problematizes world music in “A Sweet Lullaby for World Music” (2000). He views the intersection of academic and commercial markets as “a highly visible commercial documentary music recording industry” developed in the 1950s and 1960s in which academics became “guarantors of musical authenticity meant equally to signify authoritative documentary realism and cultural uniqueness” (2000:147, 148). In the world of Old-Time Music, this moment (i.e., the 1950s and 1960s) was roughly the era in which Folkways Records and Recording Corporation (1948), Arhoolie Records (1960), County Records (1963), Rounder Records (1970), June Appal (1974) and a handful of other labels began to release field recordings and to reissue early commercial recordings of Old-Time music.

### **The Ubiquity of Field Recordings among Connoisseur Listeners**

Old-time connoisseurs voraciously create, collect, archive, trade, and consume field recordings. Field recordings of all sorts circulate wildly through the contemporary Old-Time community. I can think of few other music scenes as deeply engaged with field recordings.

Not only do field recordings circulate, but, as this dissertation argues, they shape musical practices, attitudes towards issues of authenticity, and recording aesthetics. In their deep study of field recordings, Old-Time musicians encounter and internalize the voices of field recordists. Tropes of the bumbling folklorist in the field circulate alongside the music, inviting parodic imitations of folklorists and critiques of early folkloric notions of authenticity. Well-versed Old-time players, for instance, joke about the obnoxiousness of folklorist Alan Lomax’s interaction

with historic North Carolina fiddler Marcus Martin. A joke can be made by parroting Lomax's incessant question, "What's the next selection Mr. Martin?"

The joke transforms into a sharp critique in Old-Time musician and filmmaker Tom Krueger's 2012 film *Deep on Hog Mountain* (Krueger 2012).<sup>4</sup> The copy for the film reads: "When two hapless history professors set out in search of 'Authentic Appalachian Old-Time Musicians', they find exactly what they're looking for . . . Or do they?" Through the film, Krueger challenges notions of authenticity inherited from early public folklore policies that privileged emplaced, familial traditions. He employs the trope of the field recorder working with traditional Appalachian musicians.

The life of field recordings in the contemporary Old-Time community demonstrate that field recordings and the history of the practice generate unexpected resonances in communities that have been recorded and have consumed the recordings. The practices and artifacts that coalesce under the term "field recording" deserve sustained scholarly attention. They have the potential to go wild.

### **Conclusion**

In this literature review, I've summarized the ways in which Old-time music has been written about, and outlined the new literature that I will introduce into the conversation about the music. By raising a different set of questions grounded in issues of mastery and aesthetics, sound technologies, and the performing/hearing body, my exploration pushes the scholarship on Old-time in new directions, revealing that the genre is far more complicated than the extant Old-time scholarship might suggest. I raise different questions to explore meanings not yet explored.

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<sup>4</sup> The film can be streamed at this link: <https://vimeo.com/59084814>

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