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*"I like it when a fiddle tune has a part in there that kinda sounds like it's the tune and then kinda sounds like somebody stole it out of an old song."*

*Do you think there are certain major fiddle players that might have contributed a large number of tunes to the "traditional" repertoire we play now?*

Oh sure. Absolutely. [Shows me the book *The Rantin' Pipe and Tremblin' String* by George Emmerson, 1971]. I've read it twice and I'm a gettin' ready to read it again. I would say in the 18th century and the 19th century that we're looking at the Gow family — several generations of great fiddle players in Scotland; William Marshall in Scotland; Peter Milnes... Of course, O'Carolan — we're still finding stuff of his. These guys were prolific. They wrote volumes of stuff, and half of what they wrote, we don't even know they wrote it and we're playing it!... In the old days, it was not fashionable to say "I wrote that." The old timers would write 'em and then they'd take 'em out and play 'em and they'd say, "Here's an old tune I remember my grandfather playing." They would never own up to making it up themselves.

*Why is that?*

I don't know. I think it has a lot to do with the fact that they want that tune to be an "old time" tune. This business of memory in music, and this business of "old time" and it going back and it being that thing seems to be very important. In other words, the words "old time" — I think you'd be real hard to get that divorced from the word fiddling. Does that make sense? And so many fiddle sessions, old men like to come to fiddle sessions and listen and say, "Yup. That's the way that's supposed to go. By God, now that's the old time way of playing that, son!" See, it's all couched in that kind of thing. I grew up with that. It was all old time and fantasizing about, "God, wouldn't you have loved to hear grandpa play that! Wouldn't you like to hear old so-and-so, wish he was still around. Boy, he could tear that thing up!" You know, and everything like that.

*So did that make it tough on you as a writer who wanted to play some of your new tunes?*

Well, if I wanted to, I could just write tunes and say, "Well, here's an old tune I learned back in double-ought six!" Or whatever. Yeah, it does. It does. A lot of fiddle players, the minute they found out you wrote the tune, they're reluctant to play it. Bill Monroe certainly had that problem but then he got to a point where people were really digging on what he wrote, so they started playing what he would write....

The whole study is what survives and why. Some tunes, the reason they hang around is because they are hard to play and they become competitive pieces. Scotty Fitzgerald, he played a tune [plays], which is "Acrobat's Hornpipe." And that's in Bb and it's got a lot of fingering to it and everything like that. It's not an ironclad tune, necessarily, but it's got a lot of stuff on it so that it can be competitive. It's like, "All right, let's see you play this!" and it makes a good contest piece. A lot of fiddling is competitive. It's centered around contests, who can beat who, and that is part of its beauty. To a fiddler, that's beautiful.

*What exactly is your definition of an "ironclad" tune?*

Well, it's any tune, to me, that anybody can play and mess up pretty bad and it'll still be that tune. As opposed to a tune where, if somebody messes it up, it either becomes something else or it just falls apart. [Demonstrates by playing "Old Joe Clark" a dozen very different ways.] Now the core of "Old Joe Clark" is just [plays], so all those rhythmic hooks and everything like that, I can take any one of those tunes and start dressing it up with rhythmic hooks, you know. And also, too, the way you play has a lot to do with it. One guy can take a melody and it's just, "Hmmm. I don't see anything in that." and the next guy can play the exact same notes and you go, "God, do I love that!"

*That's the problem with written music, I think.*

But it's also a problem with recorded music, because if you're working on the cassette, you put a tune down and you're so influenced by your performance that you can't see that worth of the tune. But if you've got it on paper, you don't hear the performance and then you can really judge the piece. It works both ways.

*[Some months later, we continued the interview by phone. John has reworked his "Fiddler Magazine" tune a bit, extending the 6 measure sections to 8 measures and adding another part.]*

That last part, it just occurred to me it needed a part where the notes "dwelled" a little bit. It's kind of a ragtime thing, and also I like it when a fiddle tune has a part in there that kinda sounds like it's the tune and then kinda sounds like somebody stole it out of an old song.

*Are there any places where you think a specific bowing ought to be notated?*

Not really, 'cause I don't really think of bowing that way. Maybe I should, but I kinda improvise the bowing as I go along, and I try to change it up, of course. I kind of agree with Mark O'Connor about not keeping the same pattern any longer than about two bars. And I'll play long bow and then I'll play two and three notes per stroke and then I'll play some of that off string bowing, and then 2 and 1 1, you know yah, dah dah, yah. I play a little bit of that sometimes.

Of course, a lot of times, after you get a handle on the melody, which is like a joke — it's like getting a joke — once you get a handle on the melody, you're liable not to play it exactly note for note the same way every time you go through it, so then your bowing will probably change anyway.

*How would you categorize the style of the "Fiddler Magazine" tune?*

Oh, I don't know if I would. It just came out of my head. And what's in my head is all the influences I've ever had, all the way back to growing up with Dr. Gray and Gene Goforth, and people I played with when I was young.

*Could you talk a little more about your interest in Ed Haley's music?*

Basically, I heard Ed Haley's music on that Rounder record and I just absolutely fell in love with it. And then I began to try to find out more about Ed and try to find more of that music, and I eventually met Ed's son, Lawrence. And we went to where Ed was from in Harts Creek, West Virginia, and started discovering stuff about his story and his background. And one thing led to another and we started digging out the history, and now Brandon Kirk and I are in the process of making a book about it. And the book'll have a lot of transcriptions of tunes, and it'll tell how I learned about Ed's fiddling from Lawrence. Lawrence and I spent a lot of time sitting around the kitchen table and I'd play something, I'd say, "Well, now, how about this?" And he'd say, "No, that don't look right and it don't sound right. He played more of a long bow and the note did such-and-so." And then I'd play something and he'd say, "Well, now that's OK, but he played it faster than that," or "He played it slower than that." Or he'd say things like, "Well, you're using too many notes," or "You're not putting enough umph into it," or "You're putting too much umph in it." And eventually

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we just zeroed in on what I now refer to as the Ed Haley bow stroke and bow hold. And then Lawrence let me have recordings of all the rest of the tunes, and Bob Carlin and I are in the process of putting all those tunes together to come out on Rounder. It's gonna be four CD's of all the breakdowns of Ed Haley.

Bobby Taylor, from over in Charleston, West Virginia, learned a lot from Clark Kessinger. Clark Kessinger learned a lot from Ed Haley, and Bobby Taylor had some good clues to what the Ed Haley bow stroke was. Also, I believe in genetic memory. I believe that you're born with the memories of your parents and your ancestors, but you need these little clues and little reminders to bring things out. Now there were times when Lawrence would look at me and he'd say, "Boy, I just don't know, 'cause I don't play the fiddle and I don't know music and I don't know what to call it." And there were other times when he would talk to me and he'd start thinking, "Well, it would seem to me like if it was the bow pressure and little subtle pressures here and yonder," and next thing you'd know, he'd be talking as if he were an expert and it would be stuff that would be valid... After a while, I got to kidding him and referring to him as my fiddle professor.

And then I'd come back to the house and I'd play onto tape and I'd listen to it and I'd compare the tape to what Ed was doing. I've learned a lot about music playing it on tape and listening to it back and then playing it again and trying to make it better. I feel like when you're actually playing music that what you listen to is a lot different than when you just listen to it... So I think tape is real good feedback for things like that.

*Now, other than Clark Kessinger, were there many other fiddle players that picked up things from Ed Haley?*

Oh, I think so, yeah. A lot of old fiddle players that we talked to, practically every one that we talked to said that the best fiddle player they ever heard was Ed Haley. And then we ran into people who heard their parents talk about Ed Haley. Little Jimmy Dickens told me one time backstage at the Grand Ole Opry that his daddy used to mention Ed Haley as being the best fiddle player he ever heard and Kenny Baker told me one time that his daddy had heard Ed Haley and said that he was the best fiddler he had ever heard. The reason that his music wasn't known was because he didn't ever record on a record label or play on the radio. He only played on the street. So people that heard him would have had to have just heard him on the street or around a courthouse or something like that. 'Cause he didn't go out and play stage shows or do anything like that. He was blind and he was suspicious of people. So

music with him was very much of a cash and carry situation. You want to hear a tune, you put some money in the hat and he'll play the tune for you, and play a good long version to it. He played dances, but he never would make any records.

*Do you know if Ed ever wrote any tunes?*

Yes, he only admitted to writing a couple of tunes but in researching a lot of his tunes, I think he probably wrote more than he actually owned up to — which is actually a very old fashioned concept. Now Ed was known to improvise a lot. He'd take a little two part tune and he'd improvise parts on it and he always claimed, he said when he started one out you'd be able to know what it was but when he got off in the middle of it, especially if it was a tune he played for ten or fifteen minutes, he said you might not recognize it at all. And then when he got down to the end of it, you'd recognize it. The fiddlers of the British Isles, when they play, in order to get variety, they play medleys of tunes. Over in this country, Ed Haley and particularly the guys in Texas, they play the same tune but they improvise parts on it, and that is essentially the same thing but they group it all as the same tune. And it's interesting because Ed Haley inspired Clark Kessinger and Clark Kessinger inspired Benny Thomasson and Major Franklin, who are kind of the leaders of the Texas contest movement, which is basically taking those old two-part tunes and improvising a lot of parts to them, and then

those parts become engraved in stone and become part of the tune.

*Do you think that's one of the reasons that Ed Haley was so respected — his ability to improvise?*

I think so. Yeah, he was like a jazz musician. He was like the Charlie Parker of fiddling up there. He loved Scott Joplin, and you can hear a real ragtime influence in lots of his tunes. But, see, the whole thing in fiddling when you improvise is to improvise in such a way that it doesn't sound like you're improvising. It just sounds like old parts, or it sounds like something that was already engraved in stone. And I think he was real good at that.

*Has your own fiddling style changed from this research?*

I would say definitely. Ed has become a tremendously big influence on me...

I hear a lot of music and then I go off and the music starts recombining itself in my head and I guess that's the improvising. I can remember the tunes, but then the tunes all go together and start marrying each other and producing new tunes in my head, and I don't know where it comes from. That's probably the part of what I am and what I do that I understand the least. It's like there's a valve in there and I turn the valve and all this stuff comes out. ♪

## Fiddler Magazine

By John Hartford, © John Hartford Music, BMI ("Final" version)