

Kenny Baker

A Week with a Bluegrass Legend

By Robert Michel



Kenny Baker with Dale Williams at the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes, 1994

Photo: Robert Michel

If someone were to ask you to pick the best fiddler in bluegrass, who would you name as your choice? Would you answer, "Kenny Baker?" Most bluegrass musicians and bluegrass fans would, because Kenny is ranked as one of the finest fiddlers ever to play bluegrass music.

Kenny is best known for the twenty-two years he spent playing fiddle with Bill Monroe and his Bluegrass Boys. When many of us first began to listen to bluegrass music, it was Kenny's fiddle that we heard with Bill Monroe on records and at festivals. His style set a standard for bluegrass fiddlers in many bands.

You might be surprised to learn that Kenny Baker no longer considers himself a bluegrass fiddler. And that the fiddle was not his first choice of a musical instrument. Kenny Baker is a man of great musical gifts, which are rooted in some unexpected influences. There are many facets of this internationally recognized fiddler which are little known.

I was given a first-hand opportunity to learn about the real Kenny Baker when he participated as one of the featured "Fiddle Masters" at the 18th Annual *Festival of American Fiddle Tunes* at Port Townsend, Washington, this past July.

Imagine the opportunity to spend an entire week with Kenny Baker as he teaches his techniques and plays his fiddle! For those of you who are not familiar with the *Festival of American Fiddle Tunes*, it is held every July by Centrum, a non-profit arts organization that sponsors events involving traditional music and art forms. "Fiddle Tunes," as it is commonly called, is a week-long fiddle camp dedicated to preserving and passing along traditional fiddle styles.

Approximately 300 fiddlers from all over the United States and Canada gather at Fort Worden State Park for seven intense days of workshops, jamming and dancing. Among the several fiddle masters this year were Kenny Baker for bluegrass music, Charlie Acuff (Roy Acuff's cousin) for Tennessee-style fiddle, and Red Wilson, originally from North Carolina. Josh Graves accompanied Kenny Baker to help with the workshops. Bluegrass fans know him as Uncle Josh of the Flatt & Scruggs group. Josh plays dobro, and also instructed in that instrument.

Each day Kenny Baker would do a morning workshop. And this is where the fun would begin. The information in this story was gathered during Kenny's workshops and at dinner with him.

The first opportunity to meet Kenny came on day one of Fiddle Tunes. On Monday morning about thirty of us filled the classroom where Kenny Baker would do his first workshop. He and Josh Graves were seated next to each other in front of the class. Dale Williams, of the Seattle bluegrass band Sockeye, would play guitar with them for the week.

"Well, what do we do now?" asked Kenny. "We're here and you're here, so what comes next?" No one in the class answered. They were definitely in awe of the two bluegrass legends sitting in front

of them. But Kenny's question was a valid one, because the Fiddle Tunes Masters are not teachers. Many of them were in their seventies and eighties. They had never taught students. Rather, they learned their music by ear and developed their style through playing at barn dances and other social events.

Someone finally broke the ice and shouted, "Kenny, play 'Grassy Fiddle Blues.'" Kenny looked at Josh, picked up his fiddle, and played an exquisite rendition. There was a reverent silence, and someone else asked for "Kentucky Waltz." At this point, Kenny declined. "When I left Bill Monroe eleven years ago," he said, "I stopped playing his music." That caught us all a little by surprise, but it would be several days before Kenny explained the reasons behind that statement.

One of the first questions asked of Kenny was how and when he came to play the fiddle. "My dad and my granddad were both fiddlers," he related. "They only knew about ten tunes, and they played those all the time at dances and other occasions. So they really burned me out on the fiddle. Up in the mountains where I was from in eastern Kentucky, two or three times a week they would have what they called shindigs, see. Big dances. They'd take all the furniture out of one room, so you could sit in there and frolic and dance, you know. I played the guitar, back when I was about ten years old, and they always wanted me to back up their fiddle playing. They would come in and wake me up at ten, eleven o'clock at night. I would be kept up until two, three o'clock in the morning backing them up with the guitar."

It was clear from Kenny's comments that any interest he may have had in the fiddle was extinguished by the attitudes and manner of back-up duties pressed upon him by his dad and granddad as he grew up. So how did Kenny begin to play the fiddle? "During World War II, I was stationed in Okinawa for the Navy. I was playing guitar in a band that entertained at the USO Club. One day a fiddle was sent to the base. There was to be a square dance, and the Commander asked if anyone knew how to play that fiddle. It turned out that I knew enough to get by on it.... So I played for that square dance. I knew two songs, 'Cabbage' and 'Old Joe Clark.' I played these for four hours that night. After it was over, the Commander came over to me and told me from that time forward I would only play the fiddle, and would not play the guitar. And that is how I got started. I was about nineteen years old at the time."

Kenny had a consuming interest in Western Swing music during this time. "I heard Bob Wills. They had three fiddles, which I did not know they were using, and that really gained my interest. They were doin' 'Silver Bells.' I thought that was the prettiest sound I'd heard in my life. Of course, I'd heard Stephane Grappelli, too. That was a totally new sound to me."

Kenny began attempting to copy that fiddle sound of Bob Wills' recordings without knowing there was more than one fiddle. Could this have influenced how he developed the rich double stops that have been part of his fiddle style? "I think you're probably right

about that. I was trying to play my fiddle so it sounded like what I was hearing on the records, but I didn't know that they had two and three fiddles."

Kenny continued on about this time in his life: "I never had enough nerve to play like Grappelli. It's amazing what the man plays. My early years of playing I liked to play a lot of Western Swing."

When Kenny returned to the United States after World War II, he went to work in the coal mines. He picked up the fiddle again about three years later to play for local square dances. In 1953, Don Gibson called and asked him to join his band. Because of new automation in the coal mines, Kenny had been laid off only the day before Gibson's call, so he accepted the offer.

"I never dreamed of playing professional music. I've never asked for a job playing. I could have played for [Bob] Wills at one point. Don Gibson, I'd never met him, but he called me at home. I worked for Don about five or six years. That man was a fine musician. He was a prolific songwriter. Fine rhythm man." Kenny leaves out the fact that Don Gibson was one of the major country superstars of the 1950s, and playing in his band gave Kenny exposure and playing time with some of the most talented musicians in the industry at that time.

Bill Monroe was his next stop. "I had never played bluegrass music when Bill Monroe approached me [in 1957]. I joined Bill and he was very specific about the way he wanted his brand of bluegrass music played. There was a big difference in the two people's music. I played an amplified fiddle with Gibson. You don't do that with Monroe. That fiddle sounded like a peanut in my ear for three or four months until I got used to it. It's like I couldn't hear it."

Kenny continues: "When I went to work for Monroe, I knew the melody to 'Kentucky Waltz,' I guess. That was about it." Did Kenny actually create the fiddle parts on his Bill Monroe tunes? "Well, some. Bill was a fine writer and good instrumentalist. All the ideas were Monroe's, and he was paying me. So I put it together according to his ideas. Working with Bill Monroe is kind of a different ball game. I'll tell you, I'd enjoy playing any number with Bill on stage. Never twice alike did he play them. He never had a set pattern. One day he'd play it pretty peppy, the next day he might make a waltz out of it. It depended on how he felt."

You can better understand Kenny Baker's musical style and direction when you learn a surprising fact: Kenny Baker started out as a guitar player. He loved swing and hot jazz music. His tastes ran from Bob Wills to jazz guitarist Django Rhinehardt, who performed

"When you play your own songs, there's no way no one can say you didn't play it right!"



Photo: Robert Michel

Stage show, Friday, July 8, 1994, Fort Worden State Park, Port Townsend, Washington: Kenny Baker, fiddle; Peter Langston, bass; Josh Graves, Dobro; Dale Williams, guitar.

with Stephane Grappelli during their gigs at the Hot Club of France. "My favorite guitar players are Luke Brandon, Don Gibson, and Walter Haines. I could name you some others that you wouldn't know."

As a result, Kenny's fiddle music is built around the knowledge of chords that he developed in playing the guitar and his strong interest in swing music. Does Kenny read music? "Not a bit!" Does he think chordally? "Certainly, I played the guitar way before I ever thought about playing the fiddle."

Kenny's love of the guitar and his skill at playing it are what started his long-time professional relationship with Josh Graves. Most people are unaware that Kenny Baker recorded two outstanding albums on the guitar with Josh Graves. Josh picks up the story: "You know, Kenny called me. He was still with Monroe and I was with Lester Flatt. And he wanted me to do an album with him. He didn't know it, but I was leaving anyway. I'd turned in my notice. He said, 'I want you to go to Chicago with me and do this.' I said okay, that I'd be at the festival in North Carolina. That was my last day. He was there with Bill, so he said, 'let's get together on the way back. So I'll ride with you and we'll run over some of the stuff.' I said okay, thinking he was going to use the fiddle. Well, darn if he doesn't pull out this guitar, and begin playing some of the best things I've heard."

Kenny and Josh's first album together was originally released by Puritan records as *Something Different* (1972). The album surprised the bluegrass world. Bluegrass writer and critic Bill Vernon said, "In both his finger picking and his flat picking, Kenny's guitar style is the perfect blend of substance and sensitivity." Master guitarist Doc Watson called it one of his favorite albums. With such a great reception, they returned to the studio and recorded *Bucktime!* (1973). Both of these albums have been reissued by Rebel Records as *The Puritan Sessions* (Rebel CD-1108).

All of this leads up to another important fact in Kenny Baker's career as a fiddler and guitar player. In 1978, he severely cut his left hand in an accident with a hunting knife. "This knife was falling, see, and I reached out and grabbed it by closing my fingers around it. I didn't realize my hand was cut that bad. It just stung a little bit. I cut an artery here too. I stopped the blood and checked in [to the emergency room]. They just happened to have this specialist [orthopedic surgeon] there. He said he'd take a little bit of time here, and I was operated on for three hours and forty-five minutes."

The recovery was less than complete. Since the accident, residual nerve damage makes it painful for him to play the guitar at all. The effect on his fiddle-playing is significant. "My little finger here, I have to train it. That's why I can't play guitar anymore. To make a slide like that, it hurts like running your finger on the edge of a razor blade. This has also changed the whole system of my note patterns on the fiddle. I've had to leave off a lot of double stops that I used to play. The worst thing a fiddler can do is play double stops and hit 'em sour."

When asked about the kind of fiddle he plays, Kenny answered, "This is a German fiddle that Roy Acuff gave me in 1972."

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However, there is probably more to the story. Liner notes on *Kenny Baker Country* (County 736) quote Kenny: "Now my fiddle is... one of the oldest fiddles I've ever seen. I don't know what year that would have made it, but Hill & Son, in England... they tried to buy the fiddle from Roy Acuff, see, and Roy wouldn't let them have it. He brought it home and gave it to me, which I'm proud of, very much."

His fiddle is a clean, uncomplicated instrument that has a sound that is more robust than bright. Kenny strings his fiddle with Thomastik Dominant strings. "I guess I set up my fiddle in a standard way. I don't file the bridge flatter or do anything like that to it." Does he have a collection of fiddles? "No, I've got about six or seven fiddles around the house."

As each day of the week passed, Kenny seemed to relax more with the class. He and Josh would play requests, and became more comfortable in answering questions from the class. You could see that Kenny has high standards. Many of the requests involved a song that he might not have played in many years. If he could remember it, he would give it a try. It was fun to watch his reactions to his own playing. "Sounds like two cats fighting this morning!" he yelled out one day as the fiddle did not respond exactly to his liking. At other times, Kenny would hit a series of double stops perfectly, and you'd hear him cry out, "Yeeeah!" with a big grin.

How would Kenny describe himself as a fiddler? "At this day and time, I don't count myself a bluegrass fiddle player," replied Kenny. "Now, I was when I worked with Monroe. But when I left Bill, I left his music there with him, see. And most of the stuff I play at this day and time is stuff that I've written and recorded myself." With a smile, Kenny then adds, "When you play your own songs, there's no way no one can say you didn't play it right!"

It is difficult to try to describe the type of fiddle player that Kenny Baker is today. The labels of "old time," "bluegrass" or "swing" do not come close to describing his style. Throughout Kenny's career, the influence of his experience with the guitar have underpinned his fiddle playing. This has been combined with his love of hot jazz, swing music, western swing music and other styles, such as big band instrumental solos. He has integrated these into the framework of country and bluegrass styles. His sound fits in,



Photo: Robert Michel

At his Fiddle Tunes workshop, Kenny Baker, accompanied by Dale Williams, teaches "Festival Waltz."

but in a very compelling manner. The following quote from a *Bluegrass Unlimited* interview in 1968 provides insight:

"... I wasn't interested in the big band sound, but I like the way they [the soloists] went about it... their notes are more distinct. Now that's gettin' back to Grappelli and the difference in him and my daddy's playin' you know... Grappelli played his music with a distinct sound and every note was there... every note he played meant something — he's not a mechanical fiddler. Now every day you hear somebody play tunes like 'Soldier's Joy' and this and that... and nine old-timers out of ten, when you hear one man play it you've heard 'em all... Some might be a little smoother, but they all stick to the same notes, they never give or take."

Clearly, one goal of Kenny Baker's fiddle playing has always been to achieve a unique musical style. He did not want the repetitive, droning nature of the old time fiddle sound that he grew up listening to in eastern Kentucky. The difference in Kenny's approach is aptly illustrated in the album he did for Bill Monroe titled *Uncle Pen*. Although Bill Monroe wished to present the tunes he heard his Uncle Pen Vandiver play, the fiddle leads by Kenny Baker are definitely not in the traditional, old-time manner.

Further reinforcing this are Kenny's comments about bowing, found in the liner notes to *Kenny Baker Country*: "I hate a short, jiggy bow. My grandfather, he played a long-bow fiddle, rolled his notes; my daddy too. And this Georgia shuffle you hear everybody play, well, to me it's garbage. If I have to play that, I'm not playing.

Anybody can play that, there's no art in it, nothin'... I can hear people do a number, but I can't play that number like they played it. I have to play it the way I hear it."

This expresses Kenny's individuality in a very concise way. His choice of fiddlers that he likes to play with is consistent with his individuality. "Blaine Sprouse is a fine fiddler. He's graduating from law school this next year. Blaine, he's helped me quite a bit on a lot of recordings. I met Blaine when he was maybe twelve. If I want to use a second fiddle player, he'd be the man I'd call. He thinks just like I do, you know. I don't have to rehearse with that boy. All's I gotta do is throw it out there and he'll grab it. And of course Bobby Hicks is another good man like that. Buddy Spicher is also great in that way."

Another question posed to Kenny is about how he structures his breaks. "Well... it depends on who you're working with. It depends on the voice of the singer, and how you feel. Some pickers you get with, if you stray just one bit off the melody, they'll totally quit. I try to play into what's going on, I guess."

Kenny Baker's biographical information helps fill out the picture of his development of his musical talents. Kenny was born on June 26, 1926, in Jenkins, Kentucky. Jenkins was a typical company-owned coal town. When Kenny returned from World War II, he went to work in the coal mines. As noted earlier, he started his professional musical career at the time that the coal company laid him off.

During the late 1950s and through the 1960s, he continued to return to the coal mines because of the need to make enough income to support his family. He rejoined Bill Monroe in 1968. A financial turning point for Kenny was his record *Portrait of a Bluegrass Fiddler*. This was released in 1969. It proved to be a consistent and strong seller. It was the sale of these, and future albums, which provided sufficient income to allow Kenny to play music through the 1970s.

In 1985, Kenny began a full-time musical partnership with Josh Graves that has continued to this day. During the last day of Fiddle Tunes, Kenny and Josh shared some of their experiences. Kenny had about twenty-two years with Bill Monroe, and Josh worked almost that long for Flatt & Scruggs, yet their bluegrass backgrounds were very different. As Josh explains, "You should have seen us when we teamed up. He was doing Monroe-style and I was doing Flatt & Scruggs. It was funny there for a while, because he loves B flat and I hate it. Gimme G anytime. You know, Kenny would come out in B or B flat – mine is always C or G. It took a while to get adjusted to each other's songs."

On the roots of bluegrass music, Josh observed, "I tell you, in the mountains where we come from, they call this stuff bluegrass. But I was doing this stuff when I was a kid. Bill [Monroe] just happened to come along with Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys and they tagged it that. Lester Flatt was from East Tennessee and Earl Scruggs was from North Carolina, and there wasn't any difference in that music, really."

Kenny had some more to add: "Roy Hall was the first bluegrass band I ever heard. They don't give him any credit, but he was among the first. He was a Virginia boy and even had a dobro in his band. He did a lot of good recordings, and then got killed in an auto accident. He was really going there in the '40s."

By this time the Fiddle Tunes week had passed by. Kenny Baker was clearly pleased at how well the class was playing the fiddle tunes he had taught them. As for the class, there was absolutely no doubt about their positive feelings towards Kenny. Did Kenny have any last words for his students? "Well, I had my struggles to get this fiddle here to start sounding like I wanted it. As quick as you all are picking this up, just stick with it, because it'll happen for you!"

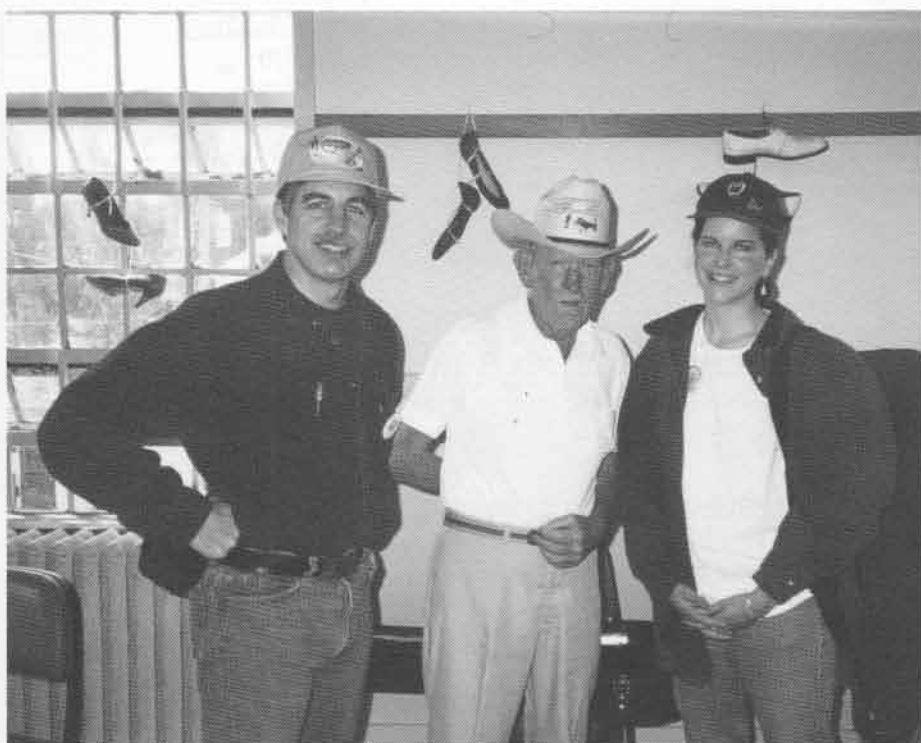
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Left to right: Robert Michel, Kenny Baker, Natali Tremblay, Fiddles Tunes, 1994

Photo: Robert Michel

"The worst thing a fiddler can do is play double stops and hit 'em sour."

Brown County Breakdown

Transcribed by Jack Tuttle as played by Kenny Baker on his Kenny Baker Plays Bill Monroe album (County 761). This is a three part tune in the key of E. The bowing is a close approximation of the recording but don't feel compelled to use it. This should be played as smoothly and cleanly as possible.

$\text{♩} = 124$

A part

B part

C part

Detailed description of the musical score: The score is for a three-part tune in E major (one sharp). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 124. The A part (measures 1-11) starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. It features a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with slurs and accents. Measure 11 ends with a repeat sign. The B part (measures 12-17) continues the melody with similar rhythmic patterns, including triplets and slurs. Measure 17 ends with a repeat sign. The C part (measures 18-24) concludes the piece with a final cadence. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, triplets, and repeat signs. Chord symbols (E, B7, D) are placed above the staff to indicate harmonic structure. Fingering numbers (0, 4, 3) are provided for specific notes.

Lonesome Moonlight Waltz

Transcribed by Jack Tuttle as played by Kenny Baker on his Kenny Baker Plays Bill Monroe album (County 761).

This Monroe piece showcases Baker's control of intonation and tone. Notice the pronounced slide with the 3rd finger in the recurring triplet figure. Measures 17 - 20 are written in the 2nd position though this isn't absolutely necessary.

$\text{♩} = 108$

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 3/4 time signature. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 108. The score consists of nine staves of music, each starting with a measure number. The first staff (measures 1-4) has chords Dm, F, and Dm. The second staff (measures 5-8) has chords Dm, G, and A. The third staff (measures 9-12) has chords Dm, F, and Dm. The fourth staff (measures 13-16) has chords C and F. The fifth staff (measures 17-20) has chords Bb and F, and includes fingering numbers (1, 2, 3) and a slide symbol. The sixth staff (measures 21-24) has chords G, C, and A. The seventh staff (measures 25-28) has chords Dm, F, and Dm. The eighth staff (measures 29-32) has chords C and F. The score features a recurring triplet figure in the bass line, often with a slide on the 3rd finger. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the eighth staff.