

This is one of a (sort of) regular series of articles by David Spalding, a performer and freelance consultant from Edmonton.

Singing Our Dreams

Where do songs come from? As a performer who writes some of the material I use, the question is always at the back of my mind. Although it can be hard work to compose, many artists in different media have talked of times when the words and music come as if at dictation, and the word 'inspiration' is commonly used for this situation. A string of coincidences in my contacts and reading has led to an interesting insight into the nature of inspiration.

Emile Benoit, the French Newfoundland fiddler, tells a splendid story on the sleeve of his album *Emile's Dream*. (Pigeon Inlet Productions PIP 732). It seems that one night he dreamed a fiddle tune. "At 3 o'clock in the morning, I woke up and here was the tune in my mind. So, I got up and I took my violin and I played it. I had no tape recorder so I called my sister and told her that it was an emergency and she had to tape my jig over the telephone because if I went back to bed, I might forget it. So I went back to bed, and sure enough when I got up, the jig was gone. A good thing I called my sister."

I first heard this story when I was privileged to meet Emile during the CFMS conference in Newfoundland a couple of years ago. I was fascinated to meet him and storyteller and songwriter Lem Snow. Both are creators as much as carriers of a tradition, though their material is close enough to traditional songs and tunes that their audiences are comfortable with their products. Much is said in the literature about the continuity of folk tradition, but relatively little about the creativity of folk performers. Their original work has perhaps been neglected by collectors, who were often seeking material of greater antiquity.

In the past, many folk performers must have devoted much time and effort to creating songs, tunes and stories within the folk tradition of their areas. Otherwise, there would be no body of folk material - no matter how faithfully it has been passed down it has all been created at some point. A few of those writers who arise from the folk are of the calibre of Robbie Burns and Woodie Guthrie - writers of such skill that people forget they grew out of folk tradition. Relatively few lesser creative figures, such as the Maritime singer Larry Gorman, have been studied in any detail (Edward Ives, 1964, *Larry Gorman, The Man Who Made the Songs*. Indiana University Press).



You and I and Nobody Knows Singing Our Dreams

by David Spalding

I was fascinated by Emile's story of the dreamed jig, as it related to an experience of my own, when a year or two ago I dreamed a children's song. The words of the chorus and the broad idea were in my head when I woke. It bore no particular relation to anything I had been planning to write, but had a definite premise, and went down easily on paper. It had no tune. Since then, I have come across increasing numbers of other instances of this unlikely method of composition.

The album *Shetland Fiddle Music* (Tangent TNGM 117) presents some other examples. In the excellent notes, one informant talks of the origins of the tune *Winnadepla* in which the composer had the responsibility and the job of watching a water mill. "this particular case the man he fell asleep. And he dreamed the tune and when he got home he took down his fiddle and played." Another tune, *Spence's Reel*, was learned at night from the fairies, and two instances are given of tunes inspired by machinery; both perhaps situations expressive of a trance state.

Aboriginal traditions relate much more closely to dreams. The Australian aboriginal term "Dreamtime" for the mythical past, and the arrival of sacred songs through dreams in the vision quests of North American Indians are well known. Such traditions are not easily lost, and native singer Winston Wuttunee includes a song (*Daddy Do*) on his album *Me and My Friends* (Sunshine SSB -408) which was "given to Winston in a dream... as he starts to write the song, his dream comes back to him and he uses the melody from the dream for the song."

Classical music also has examples, for Stravinsky is recorded as having dreamed the main fiddle tune of *A Soldier's Tale*, which is interestingly a somewhat folksy melody on a very traditional instrument. "...one night he dreamed he saw a young gypsy woman sitting by the edge of the road, playing a violin with the full length of her bow to entertain the child in her lap. On awakening... he was able to salvage the violin tune, which became one of the main motifs of the *Soldier's tale*" (Hartog, *European Music of the Twentieth Century*). The same source records that the central dance of *'The Fire Bird'* was also dreamed.

So far I am not aware of any examples from jazz, but the act of improvisation is another form of spontaneous creation, which also can have some resemblance to dreaming.

Outside the musical tradition, the Scottish writer and folklorist Andrew Lang has been recorded as having dreamed poems and story situations, all leading to published work (Green, 1946, Andrew Lang).

What significance can be ascribed to the dreaming of songs and tunes? Dreams are now understood as a recording of mental materials, which in a creative person may well lead to production of similar materials that concern their waking hours. It is not therefore surprising that a fiddler dreams fiddle tunes, a songwriter songs, and a poet poems.

Many artists recognize specially creative situations. The first song I ever wrote (nearly 30 years ago) was on a train, and I find long journeys in which I am driving Alberta's empty secondary highways particularly conducive to song and story 'writing'. These are situations which induce a semi-trance state, in which it is relatively easy for the conscious mind to dip into the subconscious. I have written several songs on the road, and find it easy while driving to create a throwaway story to amuse the kids by starting cold 'Once upon a time' without a preliminary thought. ('Writing' is of course the wrong term here, as the songs and stories are produced orally, and only afterwards can be written down if worthwhile. Our society is so far from an oral tradition that we do not have a convenient word for creating a song or story without the implied writing of it down.)

Two of the Shetland fiddlers record machinery (often hypnotic) as another inspiration, and drug use by some musicians and other artists may be an attempt to take short cuts to the same state.

It is one thing to dream it, and another to remember it the next morning. Emile's frantic efforts to record the tune show the importance such material may achieve. Apparently we dream all the time, and do not usually remember the results, and yet may be aware of having something unresolved at the back of the mind, which may be brought into the conscious mind by a reminder. In English usage allows one to 'break a dream' to become conscious of it in this way. Ironically, while telling my wife Andrea and friend about this, I inadvertently reminded her of a dream she had had the night before - another song. Once reminded she was able to remember and write it downe.

Of course, the subconscious is not necessarily a better songwriter than the conscious mind. Only the most brilliant of us are able to dream something that cannot be improved by a working over by the conscious mind, if it is to produce something that is usable in print or performance. But it can provide an interesting deepening of the creative process. What wonderful things do we create in our sleep that we never remember?