

Tune-Recall Among Traditional Fiddlers on Prince Edward Island

Ken Perlman

Ken Perlman is an American banjo and guitar player who has an advanced degree in ethnomusicology. Bulletin readers will perhaps know him best for his many instruction books and columns on folkloric instrumental techniques. His tune-book *The Fiddle Music of Prince Edward Island: Celtic and Acadian Tunes in Living Tradition* (Mel Bay, 1996) was awarded a prize in publishing by the Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation for helping to "preserve, interpret, and disseminate our province's fiddling heritage." He has produced an anthology cassette of field recordings entitled *The Old Time Fiddlers of Prince Edward Island* (Marimac Recordings), and a forthcoming two-CD set of field recordings to be released by Rounder Records (working title: *The Prince Edward Island Style of Fiddling*). In terms of the cultural aspects of PEI fiddling, he has published several articles in American and Canadian periodicals, and he is currently at work on a book based on the fiddlers' oral histories, entitled *Couldn't Have a Wedding Without the Fiddler*. His latest album, *Island Boy* (Wizmak Recordings), features settings of Prince Edward Island fiddle tunes for 5-string banjo and guitar.

Prince Edward Island (PEI) is home to one of the oldest, strongest, and most vibrant traditional fiddling cultures in North America. Fiddling was first established there by Scottish immigrants in the late eighteenth century, greatly influenced by Irish immigrants arriving a generation or two later, and strongly seasoned by the unique rhythmic sensibilities of the original European inhabitants of *the Island*: the Acadian-French.

In 1991-2, with a grant from the Earthwatch Foundation, a number of volunteers under my direction recorded music and collected oral histories from approximately one hundred traditional fiddlers on PEI. The material that follows was gleaned from analysis of interview transcripts made from these interviews.

Because of a variety of historical factors—not the least of which was a long term policy by the Canadian Federal Government that promoted growth in the center and west of the country while ignoring the east—PEI was long an economic and cultural backwater. Many advances that urban North Americans take for granted—such as electricity, paved roads, and automobile travel—were not a part of rural Island life until well into the 1950s.

Most of the fiddlers we interviewed grew up at a time when community life was virtually the same as it had been in the days of their great-grandfathers. People rarely travelled more than a few miles (a comfortable wagon or sleigh ride), and rural *districts* (as small communities were called) were responsible not only for maintaining their own livelihood, but for organizing and conducting their own entertainment.

The major form of recreation in the district was square dancing (known locally as *square sets*), and each district had its own stock of fiddlers who supplied the music. The most common venue for square sets was the informal *house party*. Word would go out, a kitchen would be cleared, the fiddler would set himself up in the corner, and the neighbors would gather in. Archie Stewart of Milltown Cross recalls:

Back then ... there was no radios, there was no television, and that was the only entertainment we had—In the wintertime probably once a week somebody'd have a house party. And ...

everybody'd bring a pound of sugar, and they'd make fudge, and we'd have fudge. And then they'd clear all the stuff out of the kitchen, and I'd get the fiddle out and away they'd go, and they'd dance 'till twelve or one o'clock and that was an evening's entertainment. There was nothing else! And it was good pastime.

Not only did fiddling and dance provide "entertainment," but they also served other important functions within the district. When money had to be raised for the up-keep of the local school house, the community held a fiddle-dance. When the local church needed support, it scheduled dances as part of a *tea party* or *parish picnic*. When a wedding was decided upon, virtually the first act of the families involved was to line up the fiddler.

The following discussion concerns one aspect of Island fiddling, namely the means by which tunes were recalled by individual musicians. I selected this topic with the notion that other musicians and scholars who have worked with populations of traditional musicians should find quite a bit here to which they can immediately relate.

Tune Recall

Fiddle playing on Prince Edward Island is based on a repertoire of dance melodies which collectively are known as *fiddle tunes*. In the old days, these tunes were generally assimilated by individuals and passed between the generations "by ear." Even today, despite the fact that music reading is more widespread, ear-learning is still by far the dominant method of increasing individual repertoire. It's easy to say "learning by ear," and get a picture of what might have gone on. But how exactly does this process occur?

For the most part, fiddlers report that when they first came to pick up the instrument, they already had a substantial stock of tunes committed to memory. They had been exposed to these tunes as a part of growing up in a community where both fiddling and "jigging" were commonplace ("jigging" is the Island term for singing tunes with rhythmic vocables; the other name is "tuning"). Because they had been born with a "gift" for re-

taining music, the tunes had stuck. Here's how Joe MacDonald of St. Andrews remembers it:

By the time I was old enough to get hold of a fiddle, me head was full of music then. For everything I heard stayed there, and I had no trouble—I had all kinds of music to express on the fiddle out of me head.... I just learned that on me own and I didn't never have any lessons or anything.



Archie Stewart (fiddle) with long-time accompanist Chester Macswain (guitar) and author Ken Perlman (banjo).
Photographs courtesy Ken Perlman

Many fiddlers note that once they had begun to learn to play, surrounding adults helped them learn their repertoire. In some cases a member of the family would actually "spoon-feed" tunes to a youngster on a note-for-note basis, as Louise Arsenault of Mont Carmel recalls:

[My father's] the one that taught me a lot of tunes that I know today. And I had a good ear, but he would have to tune me ["sing me"] the tunes.... And he would tell me every note, because when I was smaller it was harder for me to learn. But as long as he would make the music to my ear I would pick up the music really quick....

The process of learning tunes, then, was established quite early in the life of the player. The key here is that *each tune existed first in memory*. Only later did the player find a way to express that tune on the instrument. From this early training, there often developed the ability to easily assimilate new tunes into memory. These new tunes could then be expressed in the same manner as had the fiddler's initial repertoire. Archie Stewart of Milltown Cross, Kings County, describes it this way:

You hear a tune that's catchy and it's going through your mind, and I could pick up the fiddle and bring that tune out.... I could bring what was in my mind out on the fiddle.

In most cases, Island fiddlers report that there was a stage in their lives where they could learn a totally new fiddle tune in just one or two hearings. They also report that this ability is something that for most people declines or even disappears with advancing age:

Well, when I was younger, I could hear a tune probably twice and I could play it. Now I can't do that. But when I was young I could pick up on the radio or from another fiddler or

whatever. But I;d only have to hear a tune a couple times and then I could play it....

(Archie Stewart)

The fiddlers we spoke to mention three tune-recall patterns, which could be described as *conscious recall*, *subconscious recall*, and recall via *visualization*. In all likelihood, all three patterns are characteristic to some degree of all players, with the proportion of utilization varying among

individuals.

No matter which recall pattern is in force, the process always began with hearing the tune played at a dance, house party, fiddler's gathering, or (in later years) on the radio or gramophone. The first stage was always one in which the fiddler was particularly *attracted* to a new tune. Bill Koughan of Donagh, Queens County, describes it this way:

When you hear another fiddler playing it, ... if you hear him playin' it and you like the tune, well you'll learn it. If you hear some thing you don't like, you are not going to bother with it.

In *conscious* recall, the fiddler has the tune in mind immediately after its initial hearing. He then goes home and attempts to work out the melody on his instrument:

I could be on the floor dancing a set and then a tune'd come along that I took a liking to. I'd learn that tune. I'd have that one when I went home. And when I'd get home it would take me a little while to learn to pick it up on the fiddle. But before the night would be out, I'd have the tune and be able to play it. If I didn't like it, I wouldn't make no pass at it. (Charlie Sheehan, Bear River)

In *subconscious* recall, the tune is "absorbed" in some manner by the fiddler's mind. He or she can't think of it immediately, but some time later the tune just "re-surfaces":

The way I picked up tunes, I'd go to a dance, I'd hear a tune that I liked. And I'd take particular notice to that tune, and when I'd go home I'd go to bed and the tune'd be still floating around in me head. So perhaps in a week's time I'd think of the tune and I'd start whistling it. It'd come to me like that! I don't know how it'd register—There, I guess, in me brain. And then

it'd take that long for me to get it out. That's the way I found to learn a tune....
(John-ny Morrissey, New-town Cross)

For many fiddlers, the retrieval of these "absorbed" tunes was associated with a-wakening from sleep. This was quite a widely reported phenomenon. In almost every case, fiddlers note that if they didn't make a dash for the instrument and try to play the tune on the spot, it was lost.

Now some of the old fiddlers—Ward Crane used to say that he'd hear a tune. He'd go to bed and he'd go to sleep. He'd wake up at four o'clock in the morning and he'd have every bit of that tune. He said he had to get up then and get the fiddle and play it. If he didn't, by the time he got his breakfast over, it was gone. Now, Otis Jackson, you heard him sayin' the same thing. He'd go to bed and this tune'd be in his mind and he'd wake up at 3 o'clock in the mornin'. Now he's told me this several times. He'd get up, and went down to the livin' room, and picked up the fiddle and played that tune. He said if he didn't do it then, by the time he'd get up and got his breakfast, the tune'd be gone. It seems that your subconscious mind brings it— It's there and your subconscious mind brings it out. (Archie Stewart)

As one might suspect, a tune could appear in a fiddler's mind just about any time. Sometimes this occurred in the middle of a work day, presenting the fiddler with a ticklish dilemma. Should he be "responsible" and continue with his tasks (in which case the tune might be forever lost to him) or should he drop everything and get out the fiddle. John Cousins of Bloomfield, Prince County, recounts this story of how one local fiddler handled this situation:

Guy Boulter was a great fiddler, and ... he farmed, but he never made any success of farming at all.... He would go to cut grain. Now in order to cut grain you had to haul a binder. To haul a binder you needed three horses. A binder was the heaviest piece of machinery that was on the farm for horses to haul. It was quite a complicated maneuver to hitch a three-horse team.... Anyway, they said Guy Boulter would if he was out on the binder—He'd be out cuttin' grain, and a tune would be goin' through his head. He'd be thinking of this tune. It'd get to him so bad, that he'd get off the binder, he would drive to the barn, he would unhitch the horses, and he would put them in the barn.



Joe MacDonald (1920-94)

And he would sit and play that tune on the fiddle. He couldn't stop himself.

Visualization is the process by which the players of an instrument associate certain sounds with particular actions. For fiddlers (and other players of stringed instruments), this involves the ability to associate a particular note with the position of a given finger on a given string. When a musician is able to visualize in this way,

it helps him or her remember the notes of the tune as it goes by. This association of pitch with finger-position is evidenced by local nomenclature. Specifically, Island fiddlers use the term *finger* to mean "note" or "pitch," as in "I haven't learned the *ingers* yet for that tune."

The reason that visualization is such an effective tool is that it so well imitates the actual process of learning a tune on an instrument. When a tune is "learned," a sequence of sounds is translated to specific muscle movements. Later on, it is the muscle movements that are remembered by the musician as much as is the melody. Visualization enables a short-circuiting of the process, whereby the tune has begun to enter "muscle-memory" even before it is attempted. Archie Stewart, who suffers from partial deafness to low frequencies, describes the process like this:

If I was learnin' a tune there now, I'll learn the high part of that tune right quick. But when it comes to the low part, that's where my hearing comes against me.... On the high turn of the tune which I can hear real good on the sharp ["high"] music, I can almost visualize where every one of his fingers was goin' when he was playin' that tune. But when he gets down on the low strings I can't do that, because my hearin' comes against me there. The sound tends to run together. I couldn't figure out where he was puttin' his fingers on the low strings.... But if I sat down and watched them playin' it, then I'd get it, 'cause I'd watch where he put his fingers.

Regardless of the process by which tunes were recalled, it was often the case that the fiddler was unable to retrieve the entire tune to mind the first time. In this case, he or she could hope for additional exposure to the tune, and use these subsequent hearings to fill in the missing pieces.

Well, sometimes you'd get the whole thing, and more times you'd get part of a tune. You'd be trying to get it, and you'd

have to get ahold of somebody that could play the fiddle. And you'd find out from them, and see what way it went and try to get the rest of it. (George MacPhee, Monticello)

Conclusion

In this oral-transmission music culture, we see the establishment of a process by which talented individuals develop the abil-

ity early in life to tap the mind's natural processes for retaining complex phenomena. It might be interesting to see how reports of tune recall among Island fiddlers compare with observations by folklorists and ethnomusicologists who have worked with other populations. It would also be of interest to note how these fiddlers' accounts of music learning jibe with current developments in the field of learning theory.



Sterling Baker of Montague (fiddle) and Kevin Chaisson of Bear River (piano) play for stepdancer Marlene Gallant of Tea Hill at the Rollo Bay Fiddle Festival in eastern Kings County, PEI.

A call for a Canadian Collaborator:

I am hoping to continue collecting tunes and oral histories from PEI fiddlers, and to move on into areas like video documentary. Continuing this work will naturally require an infusion of funding. Unfortunately, I have been falling through the cracks grants-wise because—as an American dealing with a Canadian subject—I qualify for neither American nor Canadian grants. At the recent Folk Alliance meeting in Toronto, Judith Cohen suggested my best course would be teaming up with a Canadian collaborator or silent partner. This individual should either have an advanced degree in folklore or ethnomusicology or be an active folk musician with a deep interest in traditional music. Experience in dealing with Canadian foundations and/or government grants is a definite plus. Anyone who wishes to contact me regarding this, or some other matter regarding PEI fiddling can email me at <kenperlman@aol.com>

—Ken Perlman

"Come on, boys," boomed the spieler. "Look alive there. Don't keep the ladies waiting. Take your hands out of your pockets and get in the game. Just going to begin, a dreamy waltz or a nice juicy two-step, whichever you prefer. Hey, professor, strike up that waltz!"

Once more the music swelled out.

"How's that, boys? Doesn't that make your feet like feathers? Come on, boys! Here you are for the nice, glossy floor and the nice, flossy girls. Here you are! Here you are! That's right, select your partners! Swing your honeys! Hurry up there! Just a-goin' to begin. What's the matter with you fellows? Wake up! A dance won't break you. Come on! Don't be a cheap skate. The girls are fine, fit and fairy-like, the music's swell and the floor's elegant. Come on, boys!"

There was a compelling power in his voice, and already a number of couples were waltzing round. The women were exquisite in their grace and springy lightness. They talked as they danced, gazing with languishing eyes and siren smiles at the man of the moment.

Some of them, who had not got partners, were picking out individuals from the crowd and coaxing them to come forward. A drunken fellow staggered on to the floor and grabbed a girl. She was young, dainty and pretty, but she showed no repugnance for him. Round and round he cavorted, singing and whooping, a wild, weird object; when, suddenly, he tripped and fell, bringing her down with him. The crowd roared; but the girl good-naturedly picked him up, and led him off to the bar.

Robert Service. The Trail of '98 (Yukon)