



A NOTE ON FIDDLE MUSIC IN AMERICAN LIFE

Richard Blaustein

Fiddle music has been a part of American life since the time of the first permanent settlements by colonists from the British Isles and France. The rich diversity of local and regional fiddling traditions in the United States and Canada is a faithful record in musical form of North America's history. Because the fiddle was light, inexpensive, small, and relatively sturdy, it was ideally suited to the needs of pioneers, who carried it with them wherever they went, playing the tunes of the Old World and creating new pieces and performance techniques of their own. The fiddle was one of the few outlets for creative expression and sources of entertainment available. Fiddle music reflected the basic law of pioneer life: make the most of the resources at hand or do without.

Until the turn of this century, before technological revolutions transformed American rural life, the only music available to rural communities was still that which their families, friends, and neighbors knew and played, and much of that was fiddle music. Except where religious belief prohibited secular music and dancing, the fiddle was played at all sorts of informal and formal gatherings: house parties, square dances, corn-shuckings, tobacco-strippings, molasses stir-offs, watermelon slicings, foxhunts, barbecues, rodeos, school programs, talent shows, and minstrel shows. Fiddlers' contests and conventions are known to have been held in Virginia as early as 1742.

Since 1900 old time fiddling had had to compete with a welter of musical styles and other types of

Walt Koken of Highwoods String Band, 1st Prize Fiddler, 1972 Festival of American Folklife.

entertainment, yet, the tradition has not died out entirely. In fact, in the last ten years it has been experiencing what amounts to a renaissance. Fiddle contests have been growing tremendously in size and number and have become more important as meeting grounds for traditional musicians than they were in the past. Organizations devoted to the active preservation and perpetuation of old time fiddling have been proliferating so rapidly in the last few years that it is hard to keep up with their growth; since 1963 over twenty such groups have been started in various states and provinces. Also, a number of small recording companies have emerged recently catering primarily to lovers of traditional music, a listening audience that has been largely ignored by the mass communications industry for a good many years.

Taking part in the revival are young people, city-born and country-born alike, along with middle-aged and older folks who grew up with traditional music and never forgot it. Together they share an appreciation of a facet of our national heritage that had been derided and scorned in the past by people aspiring to "Culture." The old familiar stereotype of the country fiddler as a clumsy-fingered yokel scratching out endless, mindless ditties was the direct product of a narrow and superficial concept of "art" and "culture," which is now happily in the process of fading away.

Old time fiddling at its best is a genuinely great art. It has dignity and complexity, yet it is down to earth; it draws heavily upon past accomplishments, yet provides ample room for individual creativity. No one knows how many thousands of tunes have been reshaped and renewed since the first fiddlers settled here, or how many musical gems have been lost forever, or how many natural geniuses lived and died unknown to the world outside their little communities, but what has been left to us shows clearly that sensitivity to beauty and delight in the simple things of life run deep in our national character. And for that reason fiddle music should be a source of national pride.

Richard Blaustein is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, Eastern Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee.