

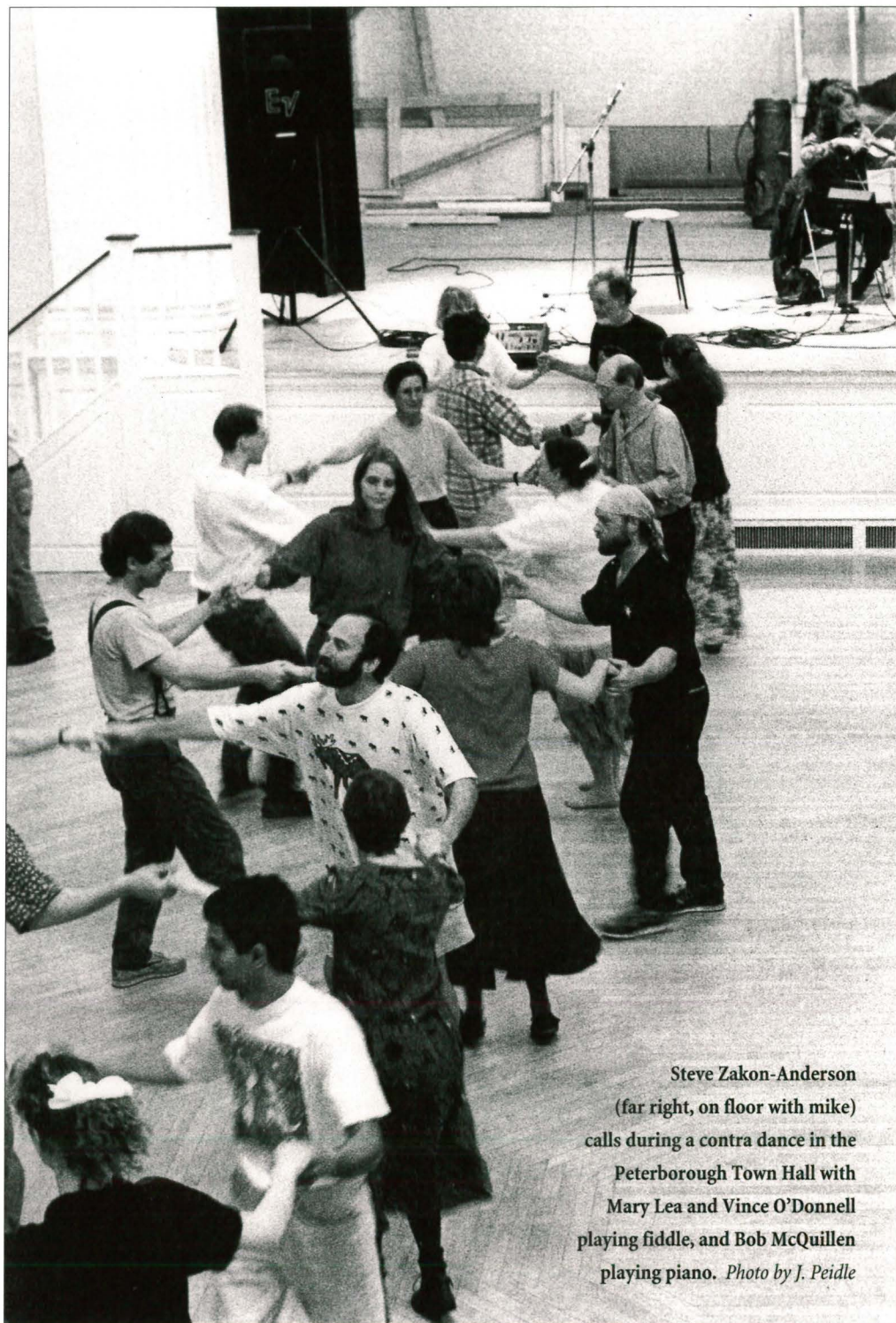
Fiddle Music, Dance, and Community in New Hampshire

Burt Feintuch

In New Hampshire, the music of the fiddle often brings people together, creating moments of deep pleasure and exuberant movement, lifting the ordinary into the realm of art, encouraging notions of community. Of course, music can do this anywhere. But New Hampshire's fiddle music tells us something about how at least some citizens experience that sense of community. This, in turn, tells us something about the state of community in the state of New Hampshire.

Last summer, I was a judge at a fiddlers' competition in the capital, Concord. We heard Franco-American music and the straightforward Northeastern style some people describe as Yankee. Irish and Scottish tunes and styles, and music associated with the flourishing contra dance scene found their way into the mix. There were examples of a generalized Northern contest style, highly technical and precise. Someone from Massachusetts played a high-tech style that transcended New England playing. In short, no one way of playing stood out as emblematic of a distinctive New Hampshire tradition. The fiddling in New Hampshire — and there's lots of it — is not one music.

We need to turn to local settings to learn more about the state's various musical traditions. On Wednesday nights, musicians gather at a small building behind Marcel Robidas's house in Dover that was built for music-making. A dozen or more men and women



Steve Zakon-Anderson (far right, on floor with mike) calls during a contra dance in the Peterborough Town Hall with Mary Lea and Vince O'Donnell playing fiddle, and Bob McQuillen playing piano. Photo by J. Peidle

On any given Saturday night, you can find a New Hampshire town hall or grange building hosting a contra dance.



with fiddles, guitars, and other instruments are there. Someone pounds out the rhythm on the piano, and the music cascades from a number of streams of tradition: French-Canadian joining a general Northeast and Maritime repertoire. Marcel was born in Orange, Vermont, to a family of Franco-American heritage, but his music has no single source, no single label. Marcel once mentioned to me that he never thought of himself as a French fiddler until people started “coming around” to interview him about his music. So, although a night playing music at Marcel’s might have a French accent, it is actually a merging of many musics. The people who come feel bound by the music. Then they go home to different towns. For musicians in New Hampshire, community and place of residence are not necessarily the same thing.

In the North Country of New Hampshire is Berlin, an old industrial town and home to Larry and Henry Riendeau. The majority of New Hampshire’s Franco-American population comes from Québec, but the Riendeaus are Acadian in ancestry, from the Canadian Maritimes. The Riendeau music is deeply anchored in family tradition. At the same time, it helped — thanks to a late-1960s LP that featured Larry and Henry with their father, Louis — to establish a canon of Franco-American fiddle music. Like many creative musicians, they have learned from whoever interested them. Their current repertoire includes tunes from Gerry Robichaud, the excellent New Brunswick fiddler who lives in Massachusetts; Canadian Ivan Hicks, a leading “Down East” fiddler; and Winston Fitzgerald, who was an influential Cape Breton Scottish fiddler. The Riendeaus have long played their music in social clubs, kitchen breakdowns, hunting camps, and other local settings. Their music is based in the community of Berlin, but it connects them to other musicians and

other places, reaching well beyond New Hampshire.

On any given Saturday night, you can find a New Hampshire town hall or grange building hosting a contra dance. Callers chant instructions to lines of couples who progress up and down, swinging, balancing, promenading, their bodies propelled by the music. A fiddle

shire's best-known contra dance fiddlers and a symbol of New Hampshire for dance enthusiasts around the country, is originally from upstate New York, and became inspired to play for dances while attending a dance and music camp in Massachusetts.

Other fiddle music of many styles can be heard all over New Hampshire.



Members of the Maple Sugar Band rehearse in Marcel Robidas's barn in Dover, New Hampshire.

Photo by Jill Linzee

and a piano are nearly always at the center of the music, joined perhaps by flute, accordion, guitar, bass, or other instruments. The full story of contra dance remains to be written, but it is clearly a transatlantic story, a transformation of older dance forms, with diverse local inspirations. Two charismatic New Hampshire figures, first Ralph Page and later Dudley Laufman, figure prominently in 20th-century revivals of the music.

Contra dance has become a national form, but New Hampshire receives much credit as the center. Peterborough, Nelson, and Dover are popular contra dance venues. The dancers, though, come from different geographical and social spaces. Some would have once happily described themselves as members of the counterculture. Many are professionals, and many are not originally from New Hampshire. It is the gathering, the music, and the dancing, that create a spirit of community. Even Rodney Miller, a virtuoso who has become one of New Hamp-

Contests at Weare and Stark, like the Concord contest, attract fiddlers from the region. The New Hampshire Strathspey and Reel Society meets monthly, playing a Scottish repertoire, under the direction of a Massachusetts musician. Irish sessions abound in bars, and master fiddler Roger Burridge, born in England but apprenticed in Ireland, has a growing presence. Bluegrass groups featuring accomplished fiddlers are scattered across the landscape. Nashua's Wilson Langlois plays old Québécois tunes as well as swing-influenced music from his days with a dance combo. Harvey Tolman, from Marlborough, a descendant of a musical dynasty in the southwestern part of New Hampshire, plays mostly Cape Breton music, having been inspired by a festival in Massachusetts years ago. Contra dance fiddlers often break into Scottish or Irish tunes, thanks to the international growth of interest in musics from those places.

It's tempting, in a state where historical consciousness runs high, to think of

fiddle music as old. But today's fiddle music in New Hampshire is as much a product of various sorts of mobility as it is about continuity, reflecting an era in which ways of thinking about locality, identities, and culture are challenged by new ways that people, information, and capital move. Some of the music's character has to do with regional history, especially population movement from Canada to northern New England. Much of it is what folklorists and ethnomusicologists describe as revival music, music played outside its original cultural community. At a time when New Hampshire has seen a considerable influx of people from elsewhere, and when statistics tell of the state's comparative affluence, fiddle music's popularity reflects a desire to create the kinds of communities we imagine were once here. Indeed, it would be very hard to say that New Hampshire fiddle music is significantly different from Vermont's, or Maine's. It's here, though, in its varied forms and settings, and it brings people together. That makes us much better off than we would be without it.

Suggested Listening

Choose Your Partners, Contra Dance & Square Dance Music of New Hampshire. 1999. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFW 40126.
Mademoiselle, voulez-vous danser? Franco-American Music from the New England Borderland. 1999. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFW 40116.

Burt Feintuch is a professor of folklore and English at the University of New Hampshire, where he directs the Center for the Humanities. A former editor of the Journal of American Folklore, he is developing, with David Watters, the Encyclopedia of New England Culture. He plays the fiddle for dancing with the Lamprey River Band, mostly in New Hampshire's Seacoast region.