



Nikos Pappas, Fiddler

By Phil Sparks

I can't be sure when I first saw Nikos Pappas play the fiddle, but it was probably four or five years ago at Clifftop—and it was one of those jaw-dropping experiences. I've heard lots of fine fiddlers, but I have never seen anyone play such complicated fiddle tunes so effortlessly.



Nikos at Clifftop, probably around the time Phil first saw him.

Photo: Julia Feder

As best as I can tell, Nikos (short for Nikolas) is originally from New Mexico, where his ancestors settled shortly after the Civil War, and he owes his unusual name to his Greek heritage. Somehow he ended up in Lexington, Kentucky, at the University of Kentucky, where he is doing graduate work in Musicology. He is an exceptionally tall man, perhaps 6 foot 4, with a full beard. (He is so large that he seems to be using a half-size fiddle when he plays.) If Nikos is a giant, he is also a gentle giant. The few times I've been around him, visiting with friends who are friends of his, he's been quiet and calm, almost bashful, and he seems to be completely humble—a rare trait among good fiddlers.

In 2004, he joined with three other musicians associated with UK to form the University of Kentucky Old-Time String Band, now known as The Red State Ramblers. They have put out two CDs. The first is simply called *The Red State Ramblers*, and the second is entitled *Commonwealth*. (Officially, Kentucky, like Massachusetts, is a "commonwealth," not a "state." I'm from Kentucky, but I've never understood the difference.) I like the Red State Ramblers just fine, but I'm here to talk about Nikos, their fiddler, and the tunes he plays on those CDs.

When I hear accomplished fiddlers talk about the greatest of all old-time fiddlers, two names commonly come to the fore: Ed Haley and John Salyer, both of whom distrusted recording companies and were recorded primarily on home taping equipment. Usually, Ed Haley is listed as the best with John Salyer taking second place. I believe that Nikos Pappas is as good as or better than either of these two legends. I'm hardly an expert, but I am willing to claim that Nikos is our greatest living fiddler and, perhaps, the greatest of all fiddlers since the birth of recording technology.

Nikos seems to specialize in Ed Haley's tunes. So far, he has recorded four Ed Haley tunes on the CDs: "Poplar Bluff," "Lost Indian," "Ida Red," and Garfield's "Blackberry Blossom," an extraordinarily difficult tune. If you Google him, you can watch him play "Indian Ate a Woodchuck," "Forked Deer," "Old Sledge," and "Petersburg Landing," and others may be out there somewhere. I have studied his version of "Blackberry Blossom" carefully, comparing each phrase to the version recorded by Ed Haley. They are virtually identical—and equally fluid. I've heard people claim that he can listen to an Ed Haley tune and transcribe it into sheet music as easily as you or I would scribble down a grocery list. I once suggested to him that he record the complete works of Ed Haley, since Haley's recordings are of such poor quality and since he (Nikos) can play the tunes with such expertise. It seems to me that such a project would make a fine PhD dissertation in Musicology.

In addition to his Ed Haley expertise, Nikos frequently gives presentations where he features the music and fiddle tunes of the Civil War. I've never attended one of those lectures, but I will jump at the first opportunity.

Nikos is probably a genius. He has won awards at Clifftop, Uncle Dave Macon Days, and the Ed Haley Memorial Festival Fiddlers' Contest, to name only a few, and it is said that he can play over 400 old-time fiddle tunes from memory. He has a strong classical music background, but you would never know it from his fiddling. He has captured the spirit of the fiddle, which is quite different from that of the violin.

Anyone who loves old-time fiddle music should be aware of Nikos Pappas.

I will end this article with a transcription of one of Nikos's tunes from *Commonwealth*. No, it's not an Ed Haley tune. Ed Haley's tunes are just too complicated for my meager skills. Instead, I give you "Maysville." It's a J.P. Fraley tune that J.P. learned from his father, Richard Fraley. John Hartford and Paul Smith have also recorded it. It's thoroughly crooked with ten measures in Part A and eleven measures in Part B. Nikos plays it clearly and slowly (at about 85 beats per minute). It's almost as if he's saying, "Here you are friends, a tune you can learn from this CD." I hope I've done a fair job of capturing the tune exactly as Nikos plays it the first time through, double-stops and all, but I would never claim perfection. Part B would probably be more accurately written as two lines of 5 1/2 measures, but it's easier to read the way it's done here.

By the way, I usually have to simplify tunes before I can play them, and I will certainly have to simplify this one a bit. If you would like my simplified version, just let me know.

Transcribed by Phil Sparks, 7/11

Traditional, from Nikos Pappas,
via J.P. Fraley, via Richard
Fraley (J.P.'s father)

Maysville (C/Am)

♩ = 85 (Nikos's speed)

Tuning: Standard (GDAE)

Part A

Measures 1-4: C, (Am), C

Measures 5-8: F, G, C

Part B

Measures 10-15: C, F, C, F, Am, C

Annotation: 4 0 One long bow stroke

Measures 16-17: F, Am

Annotation: 3 3

Annotation: 4 0 One long bow stroke

Use your 3rd finger on the D string to slide down from A to G.

PG Practices

For quite a while now, we've dedicated the first Thursday of each month to our performance group get-together where we work on our performance materials. At these gatherings, we have been playing tunes and jamming, without focusing on how to make our performances better, tighter, and more coherent.

The Performance Group Committee members, Andy Shivas, Lilly Hsu, Don Kent, ML Durham, and Ron Whitlow, the newly elected committee chair, have decided that it will be a good idea to regain our focus on becoming a better and more articulate group as players.

As you come to these practices, you will, we hope, see more attention being paid to listening to and playing with those around us, and to improving the sound of the whole group. We'll move toward polishing our tunes and their beginnings and endings, as well as playing the same versions together. In short, we will work on becoming a better performing group. Please come and be part of this effort to help all of us confidently participate in the group's performances. ~MLD



Here we are playing at Bubba and Mary Logan's at July 24th's Fourth-Sunday Jam.

pics: MLD

A Notsba Jam Site Change

Thanks to the efforts of Laura Blankenship and Jim Hornsby, Mansker's Station has provided a good north-of-Nashville space for us to meet for jams and other events for about two years. Many thanks to Laura and Jim!

As of the end of August, however, we will no longer meet at Mansker's on the Third Thursday each month. Because of the current economic downturn, the City of Goodlettsville can no longer keep the Visitors Center open at night. Notsba will have an ongoing relationship with Mansker's though, and we hope to continue participating in its Yulefest in December and other events through the year.

We've tried to find places to meet that allow for players in all parts of Davidson County to make at least some of the jams each month without having to cross the city during rush hour. With the loss of Mansker's, we will be casting about for a room in the north, west, or northwestern part of the county that will make a good jam space one Thursday a month. If you know of a place that might be considered, please let a member of the board or the jams committee know. We will be happy to follow up on the contacts you provide. It is possible that we might have several new spaces to try out, and we want you to come to those jams to see how well they function. You can then let the Jams Committee members know what you think.

Meanwhile, we do not know where or even *if* the Third-Thursday Jam will meet after August. More news on that as it develops.

Here are the Jams Committee members for you to contact with ideas: Mary Alice Bernal, Mary Lou Durham, Laura Blankenship, Phil Sparks, and Todd Wright. As Notsba President, Lilly Hsu is among the committee members as well and is happy to discuss possible venues.

~MLD

Buchanan Log House Clean-up Day: Please Volunteer to Help

Friday, September 2nd, 8:00 AM – ‘til...and **possibly evenings or a Saturday before or after that**, TBA. All friends are invited to come help. Please RSVP when the notices come out about times we will gather to work.

Buchanan Log House is our primary home for jams, and assisting with fall and spring clean-up activities is the way we contribute to its wellbeing.

We always enjoy our time working with Buchanan Log House group members and getting to know their historic dwelling. We will perform various grounds keeping activities and maintenance projects around the facility to help prepare for their annual Fall Festival. **Please join us.**

Membership Notes

WELCOME TO OUR TEN NEW MEMBERS!

Larry Joba
Joe, Deborah, and Julianna Brodnicki
Thomas Jaselskis
Sharon Collie, Tara Smith and Ben Northern
Scott and Cloris Denney

Santa Cruz, California
Hendersonville, Tennessee
Lebanon, Tennessee
Nashville, Tennessee
Hendersonville, Tennessee

THANKS TO OUR RENEWING MEMBERS

Kirk Pickering and Susie Coleman
Joy Mayfield

Pegram, Tennessee
Goodlettsville, Tennessee ~RW

Here we are again at Bubba and Mary's outnumbering our appreciative audience.

pics: MLD



Tomato Pie

1 pie shell, baked and cooled

Line pie shell with 16 fresh basil leaves (I chop these for easier serving)

Add ½ cup finely chopped or grated onions

Add 1 heaping cup of fresh tomatoes, chopped and drained well

Mix together 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese, ½ cup mayonnaise, ½ cup sour cream.

Spread this mixture over the pie, being sure to seal all the way to the crust

Top with parmesan cheese

Bake at 350 30-40 minutes

Let cool slightly before slicing

~Darlyne Kent

Darlyne first brought this luxurious dish to a Sunday jam several years ago, and I was stopped in my tracks with amazement and delight as I tasted my first bite. Tomato pie has come to signify to me everything glorious about the height of summer with homegrown tomatoes and basil at their peak. Many thanks to Darlyne for graciously sharing her recipe with us. Enjoy! ~MLD

☆ Scheduled Jams ☆

Important Note: Ongoing Changes in our Jam Schedules

- The Tune Workshops have started moving around to different Thursdays.
- For August they will continue at Mansker's Station and will be held on the *THIRD* Thursday.
- For September and October, the workshops will probably be at Church of the Advent on the *FOURTH* Thursday.
- November and December are not scheduled at this time.

In other words, the jams will continue to be held where we currently hold them, but the Tune Workshops will move around to different Thursdays—to give more people an opportunity to attend. To avoid confusion, please pay close attention to this, the "Scheduled Jams" section of our newsletter, and see August's schedule below. ~PS

August 4, 2011, First-Thursday Performance Group Practice

Look for this gathering to focus more on polishing tunes in their many aspects as the Performance Group Committee seeks to encourage us to engage in growing and developing as a performing ensemble. We practice from 6:30 to 8:30 PM. Join NOTSBA, if you're not a member already, and come get ready for the several times each year we play at places like the Nashville Zoo, Mansker's Station, and the Buchanan Log House.

August 11, 2011, Second-Thursday Regular Jam

6:30-8:30 PM, at the **Buchanan Log House**, 2910 Elm Hill Pike. Everyone who plays old-time string band music is welcome to this jam, so put down whatever you're doing and come out to play. NOTSBA jams are free.

August 18, 2011, Third-Thursday Tune Workshop

Mary Alice Bernal will teach at Mansker's Station from 6:30 to 8:30 PM, and she'll bring the following tunes:

"The Blue Goose" from Buddy Thomas, in G; "Iberia Breakdown" from Bill Driver, in C; "Zack Wheat's Piece" from Missouri, in D; "Robinson County" from Birkhead and Lane (Ozarks), in D. You can record, play, learn, and help get your favorites into the repertoire. This will be our last meeting at Mansker's for now.

August 25, 2011, Fourth-Thursday Regular Jam

Church of the Advent, at the corner of Franklin Pike and Lakemont Drive, just north of Old Hickory Boulevard where it intersects with I-65 in Brentwood, provides space with lively sound in the Youth Room of their Annex. We play here at our southern outpost from 6:30 to 8:30 PM, and we welcome all old-time players of all skill levels to this open jam.

August 28, 2011, Fourth-Sunday Jam

We're happy that Martin and Beth Fisher will host from 2 until 6 PM. We'll take a break for potluck snacks as always, so feel free to bring a treat to share. Side note: You might want to wear a bathing suit and bring a towel as Martin invites us all to swim in their pool. If the weather holds, some of us will not need to be asked twice! See you there!

The address is **4816 Foley Drive, Nashville, TN 37211**.

Directions: Go west on Harding Place from I-24 southeast of Nashville. Turn left onto Humber Drive. Go one block and turn right onto Wallace. Take the next left onto Foley Drive. The Fisher's house is on the left. Park along the street. Call if you get lost. The phone numbers are, H: 315-0611, and Martin's C: 390-2337.

Other Area Old-Time Jams

- **The Fiddle and Pick** has open old-time jams on the first and third Tuesday evenings of each month in Pegram. Gretchen and company welcome music lovers of all ages and skill levels. There's a lot of music and community going on here. fiddleand-pick.ning.com.
- **The 5 Spot** has a **Wednesday Night Old-time Jam** each week. This homey tavern/music venue located in East Nashville has been hosting an OT jam for years now. Stay up late and bear down on those strings. It's on Facebook.
- **Mansker's Station** has a **Second-Monday Jam** starting at 6:30 PM in addition to the NOTSBA third-Thursday jams they host. It's in Goodlettsville, just north of Nashville. For information beyond August, call Laura at 615-720-8829.

The fine print:

We appreciate the significant grant funding from TAC that will help bring presenters to *Breakin' Up Winter XVII*.



NOTSBA's Purpose: ...preservation and promotion of old-time string band music by bringing together persons interested in old-time music...and by reaching out to the community through public performances, workshops, seminars, festivals, and other public outreach, informational, and educational activities.

The opinions expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the editor or the *Nashville Old-Time String Band Association*. NOTSBA is a volunteer organization. While we strive for accuracy, we do not label as "official" any content found here. Have an idea for an article? **Please e-mail me at [mldurham1@juno.com](mailto:ml Durham@juno.com)**