

Old-Time Times

JUNE 2005

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EVENTS

Tennessee

Arthur Smith, Robert Spicer Memorial Fiddler's Contest

Held Saturday, the 11th of June, in Dickson at the Dickson Middle School (481 East College Street). For more information, call Lacy Beasley at 615-446-2349 or go to www.nashvilleoldtime.org.

North Carolina

Mt Airy Bluegrass and Old-Time Fiddler's Convention

Held Friday and Saturday, the 3rd and 4th of June, in Mt Airy at the Veterans Memorial Park. I'm told that the pickers will start gathering as early as Wednesday the 1st of June. Many people consider the Mt Airy festival to be the second most important old-time music event of the year, falling just behind Clifftop. For more information, call 800- 286-6193 or go to www.nashvilleoldtime.org.

Virginia

Grayson County Old-Time & Bluegrass Fiddlers Convention

Held Saturday, the 25th of June, in Elk Creek at the Elk Creek School Ball Park. For more information, call Jerry Testerman at 276-655-4740 or go to www.ls.net/~ecvfd/fiddle.html.

Kentucky

Homeplace Pickin' Party

Held Saturday and Sunday, the 11th and 12th of June, in the Land Between the Lakes at the Homeplace site. For more information, call 1-800-525-7077 or go to www.nashvilleoldtime.org.

Something New in Your Notsba Newsletter

Starting with this issue, we will allow members to place classified ads at the end of the newsletter. All items (instruments, cases, tents, etc) must somehow be related to the old-time music world. Please, no cars homes, pets, or electric instruments. If your item sells, you will be invited, but not required, to make a small donation to Notsba.

Hosts Have Been Found for All of 2005's 4th-Sunday Jams

Please E-mail Darlyne Kent (dkent@davidsonacademy.com) to schedule your home for a 2006 4th-Sunday Jam. □

Your Association Is Growing

~Jim Hornsby

The past few months have been exciting ones for Notsba. We are now officially incorporated as a nonprofit corporation, and we are in the process of establishing a nonprofit status with the IRS. Our President, Ed Gregory, deserves much of the credit for getting it done. Many people have helped and supported the project, but it was Ed who put pen to paper and led us through a mind-boggling, eye-glazing, aspirin-craving maze of forms, filings, oaths and offices to achieve our goal. If not for his tireless efforts (in his spare time he set up and now maintains our Web site), this Herculean task would not have been accomplished, and our collective hats are off to his dedication and hard work.

There are multiple reasons for becoming a nonprofit corporation. The Metro school system has had a significant budget reduction and can no longer support the association as an adult education class. Carl Myers, with the adult education program, has been a great friend to our association, and he continues to support us in every way he can, but school funding is tight, and the rules have changed, so we have to be free-standing and self-supporting. And it's time we expanded. If birds enjoyed sitting in their nests, they would never learn to fly, and we want to fly. Being a nonprofit corporation gives us the credibility we need to ask established professionals to join us as advisors and to seek government and corporate grants to accomplish our goals.

And what are our goals? I will quote from our Articles of Incorporation: "The specific purposes and objectives of the Association shall include but not be limited to the following: preservation and promotion of old-time string band music by bringing together persons interested in preserving and promoting old-time string band music and by

reaching out to the community through public performances, workshops, seminars, festivals, and other public outreach, informational, and educational activities." Tennessee has a rich and colorful musical heritage that we want to share with the world. We want to send our message out to the world and invite the world here to share it with us.

We want to recognize the old-time musicians of the past who have given us what we so enjoy today. We want to support today's musicians who put in the time and effort to keep the music alive and pass it along. And we want to encourage and educate the musicians of tomorrow who want to learn and be the future of the tradition. But the association is not just about musicians. We want to encourage and support other artists and contributors—the writers, historians, actors, poets, and visual artists who are attuned (pardon the pun) to promoting old-time music. Whatever your talent, if you have an interest, we want to help you express it.

We have high hopes for the association and every reason to believe that they can be achieved. But we need your help. Membership in the association with receipt of the newsletter has long been free, because it was subsidized by Metro. As noted above, those days are gone, and our new-found independence comes with a price tag. We are calling upon you to join us by officially becoming a member of the association. This will help us in two ways: A modest membership fee will help offset our new expenses, and a solid membership roster will help us when we begin applying for grants.

Becoming a member does not obligate you to participate in the association's activities, but we encourage you to participate. (We plan on having a lot of fun, and we want you to in on it). And please understand that you don't have to become a member to continue to enjoy our activities. Everyone will be welcome to attend our jams and performances, and the mailing list for "Breakin' Up Winter" will remain open to everyone who wants to be on the list. We will ask for a modest subscription

fee if you want to continue to receive the newsletter by mail, but we will continue to E-mail it at no charge and to post it on our Web site where it is absolutely free.

If it sounds like I am discouraging you from becoming a member, I'm not. We need your membership. We need your help, your ideas and your participation. And there is one thing that you can't get for free: The satisfaction of knowing that your interest is perpetuating the musical heritage that we all hold dear.

As soon as we can, we will be giving you an opportunity to officially join The Nashville Old-Time String Band Association. And don't worry—it won't be expensive. □

A Letter from Bill Mansfield on Breakin' Up Winter

Editor's Note: For those of you who were not at this year's Breakin' Up Winter, Bill Mansfield was a lead presenter there. He also performed on the banjo. His letter was addressed to Pat Gill.

I wanted to write and thank you and everyone in the Nashville Old-Time String Band Association for all that you did to make Breakin' Up Winter so much fun. I had a wonderful time visiting with friends, playing music, and listening to music. And I can't help but feel like I learned something.

I really enjoyed listening to Allan Jabbour talk about music in general and fiddling in particular. He is such a gentleman, and his passion for old-time music is contagious. His presentation gave me a new respect for fiddling.

Charles Wolf's knowledge of old-time music is astounding, and he always has something interesting to say. Next year, perhaps he could talk about the role of the A&R men in shaping the sound of old-time music from the early commercial period.

Listening to Charlie Acuff is a real pleasure. I hope I'm as enthusiastic about my music and still learning new tunes when I get to be his age.

And let me thank you all for giving me the chance to participate in this. I truly enjoyed sharing my research on old-time music in

eastern North Carolina. I'm looking to improve that presentation, so I'd welcome any comments you'd care to pass along.

In closing let me thank you all again for all of your efforts to make Breakin' Up Winter such a success. I'm looking forward to coming back next year. If there is any way I can help, let me know. □

Tyler Andal Performs at The Grand Ole Opry

~Joy Andale

On May 6, a young Notsba member realized a dream come true. Tyler Andale, fiddler for the Ryan Holladay Band, walked out onto the Grand Ole Opry stage as Ricky Skaggs introduced Ryan, Tyler's boss, to the crowd.

This was the first time for Ryan to have his own individual slot, and that allowed him to invite his band to play with him. The band performed "When It Rains." They received applause at least six times during the song and a huge applause at the end, which included a scattered standing ovation.

Tyler was also excited to play the same night as Alison Krauss, Tony Rice, The Whites, and Ricky Skaggs. He enjoyed hanging out backstage and having photo sessions with all of them.

Thanks to all of the Notsba members who have helped Tyler along the way. Your mentorship has paid off in a big way for him. □

What's the Difference between a Fiddle and a Violin?

~Phil Sparks

The other day I was in a hardware store looking for extra fine sandpaper. Two young ladies were helping me. When I mentioned that I needed it for some work on a fiddle, one of them asked, "What's the difference between a fiddle and a violin?" The second young lady looked at the first with disdain and said, "I mean like, a fiddle is much smaller than a violin! You know, like a banjo and a mandolin." I then did my best to enlighten them.

It's a question fiddle players hear again and again, so here's my attempt to deal with it.

The following list was recently collected by our good friend Ron Ault:

1. "Fiddle" is just a nickname for a violin.
2. A violin sings while a fiddle dances.
3. The difference is in the number of teeth of the one who's playing it.
4. A violin has a case!
5. A fiddle is a violin with an attitude!
6. It's a fiddle when you buy it and a violin when you want to sell it.
7. You can spill beer on a fiddle without wrecking its tone.
8. Same instrument, different tunes.
9. About \$20,000 a year.
10. The nut at the end of the bow.
11. The violin is played by the rich for the rich. The fiddle is played by the heart for the heart.

Here's my favorite: A violin has one fine tuner while a fiddle has four. And one more: A good fiddle can be had for under \$500 while a good violin starts at \$10,000.

At Breakin' Up Winter, Allan Jabbour and I were talking about this topic, and I declared that he was playing a violin, not a fiddle—His instrument has only one fine tuner.

Another common difference is the way they are set up. I think violins strings are far too high from the fingerboard. I asked Allan if he had lowered his strings any when he switched from violin to fiddle. He had not.

Allen went on to say what most of us already know, that the instruments themselves are the same. The difference lies in how they are played. He sees the violin as "formal" and the fiddle as "informal." I guess he was sort of echoing my claim that the violin wears a tux while the fiddle wears blue jeans.

Since I used to be an English teacher, I see the two words, violin and fiddle, in their historical context. First I'll lay the historical foundation: Englishmen spoke Anglo-Saxon, a dialect of German, until the French-speaking Normans conquered them in the year 1066. After that, English gradually became a hybrid of French and German. Today we have two words for almost everything, one Germanic, one French. Some examples are "street" and

"avenue," "car" and "automobile," "school" and "academy." In all cases, the French word has more syllables and sounds bit higher class—because the French-speaking Normans made up the upper class and the defeated Anglo-Saxons did all the dirty work.

Want one more example? Try "fiddle" and "violin." Englishmen borrowed the word "fiddle" from an early form of Latin, long before the Normans won the Battle of Hastings. The word "violin" didn't appear until the Normans were firmly in charge. It, too, came from Latin, but from a later version of Latin. It passed from Latin, to Italian, to French, and then to English.

Picture yourself in England around 1150. Who played the violin? The upper classes, those of Norman descent. Who played the fiddle? The lower classes, those of Anglo-Saxon descent. There was actually a time in prerevolutionary France when commoners were allowed to have only three strings on their violins while aristocrats used four.

To this day, it's largely a matter of social class. Some classical violinists refer to their violins as fiddles, almost as a term of endearment, but many violinists look down on fiddlers. They see us as inferior musicians playing inferior music on inferior instruments, and they may well be right. Still, I'd bet we have more fun than they do. □

Book Review:

Country Music Goes to War

By Charles Wolfe

~Patsy Weiler

From the pages of the *New York Times* to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dr. Charles Wolfe's newest work, *Country Music Goes to War* has been proclaimed a booming success in the national media.

The publication is a collection of fourteen essays that explore the tradition of war-related country music from the Civil War to the current war in Iraq. Wolfe, an English professor at Middle Tennessee State University, served as coeditor with Tennessee Technological University professor, James E. Akenson.

“Country music has never been afraid of being sentimental,” said Wolfe. “It has the ability to capture the deep feelings of heartbreak, patriotism, death, separation, and anger, all emotions associated with the tragedy of war.”

In fact, the first country music single to be certified as a Gold Record was written in 1942, during WW II. The song called “There’s a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere” was sung by Elton Britt. Britt was a young Arkansas singer who was billed as the “highest yodeler in the world,” and in 1942 he was invited to sing the patriotic number in the White House by President Franklin Roosevelt.

Writer Wayne W. Daniel gives readers a view from behind the curtain of the WWII activities at the 50,000 watt WLS radio station in Chicago. WLS was the home to the world-famous *Barn Dance* show. According to Daniel, instead of money, listeners exchanged scrap metal, paper, or rubber for tickets to see their favorite *Barn Dance* performers. By the summer of 1944, the station had aided in the collection of more than 3 million pounds of scrap. Everything from old cream separators to a junked car was donated.

Not all war music was in the serious vein. Wolfe chuckled while talking about the recordings of Georgia mill hand, Fiddlin’ John Carson, who developed a large collection of WWI songs. Carson’s 1914 comic piece “I’m Glad My Wife’s in Europe” became one of the early recording artist’s best known tunes.

“Carson wrote about a man’s wife going to visit Europe. Then the war broke out and she was stuck there,” laughed Wolfe. “His lyrics go, *I’m glad my wife’s in Europe, And she can’t get back to me, If she gets back from Europe, she’ll have to swim the sea.* It was one of those humorous nagging-wife songs that quickly became an audience favorite.”

Much of the recent media attention about the book has focused on the topic of Atomic Music, a genre of music that mushroomed into popularity following the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan in the later days of WW II.

The bomb songs, according to Wolfe, who contributed the essay on this topic, are a “bizarre” expression of how Americans dealt with the deadly new technology. Wolfe thinks the first popular nuclear county song could be “Atomic Power” released in 1946 and sung by Fred Kirby, known as the Carolina Cowboy.

According to the song’s lyrics, atomic power “was given by the mighty hand of God.” Other song titles during this time included titles like “Jesus Hits like an Atom Bomb” and the Whitey and Hogan duet, “There is a Power Greater than Atomic.” Connecting this new power with religious connotations was unique to county music, according to Wolfe.

“My E-mail box has been overflowing since the articles about the book came out in the national press,” said Wolfe. “One of the songs from the era was a talking narrative, ‘Old Man Atom,’ written by a West Coast newspaperman named, Vernon Partlow. We really didn’t know what happened to him. I got an e-mail from his son who shared with us some stories about his dad. You just never know what you may discover.”

During his later years, according to Wolfe, the senior Partlow was happy to see his ideas being kept alive. “Partlow was at a carnival and saw the line from his atom song—*peace in the world or the world in pieces*—being put on a tee shirt. When he told the kids doing the shirt printing that was a line from his song, they were afraid he was going to sue them. Instead, Partlow expressed his pleasure that they were helping to keep his words before the public.”

The book also looks at the controversy in modern country music about the war in Iraq. One of the final chapters addresses the comments that Dixie Chicks member, Natalie Maine made about President George Bush that ruffled the feathers of more conservative country artists.

In the future, Wolfe hopes to explore the topic of County Music and the Movies and encourages interested parties to contact him at cwolfe@mtsu.edu. □

A Penny Learned: PC-Based Tuners

~Ed Gregory

[DISCLAIMER: I have no connection with the makers of this product other than being a satisfied customer.]

Some PC-based tuners just play the tone that you are supposed to match, a few use your computer's microphone to "listen" to what you play and give you a nice—sometimes flashy—needle meter on your monitor.

I've run through a bunch of these before finding one that really impresses me. It offers a whole lot more than just tuning—especially if you are a fiddle player like me.

It's a \$15 product called In-Tune, from www.musicmasterworks.com, and it can be set to tune a whole slew of different instruments. This software is on my desktop computer and my laptop and is my new practice buddy. It's a great way to develop both my ear and my muscle memory for better intonation. At least, that's my story.

It uses your PC mic to hear what you are playing and displays it much larger than that little tuner you carry with you to jams and gigs. That's nice, but it's not enough reason to tune this way instead of with your pocket-sized Korg or IntelliTouch.

What sets In-Tune apart is that it also presents what it hears in a line graph. The grid on the graph is grey. What you play is a dark green until you are playing the note just right. The line representing your playing turns a brighter green when it is right on target and runs in the same space as the grey horizontal line of the graph. (This is so much easier to see than say.)

Not only does this allow me to tune and watch what I'm playing graphically line up with where it should be, but it also keeps a rolling record of what I've played for the last several minutes.

You can choose how many tones the graph currently displays, from just one to up to 32. I keep it at 12 to 16.

As a fiddle player, I use this feature to practice scales or arpeggios or difficult passages, and the line graph keeps rolling

along with me, showing me when the notes I'm playing are a bit flat or a bit sharp or are a nice bright "on-target" green.

It gives me a virtual slap on the left wrist until I play the right tone. As I'm playing, I make minute adjustments to bring my tone back into line. This combination gives me both visual and auditory feedback. It forces me to simultaneously see and hear when my intonation is off. It forces me to adjust and eventually recognize the proper tone when I find it.

In-Tune keeps track of several minutes of tuning/practice. If you are working on scales or arpeggios or just a tune, it shows what you have been playing against the grid of where the real notes are. Because it shows slides and slurs graphically, it lets you see as well as hear whether you are playing a lick consistently.

The only improvement I think it needs is vertical grid lines to function like a metronome and show me both the intonation and timing of my playing.

In-Tune has a companion program, Music Master Works. This separate program takes those same notes you are playing and seeing on a graph and turns them into standard musical notation on the spot. (It also converts voice, whistling, and other sounds into notation.)

The trick with getting notation on the fly from fiddle playing is to get the software calibrated for your instrument and surroundings. With the wrong settings, it seems to hear more notes (harmonics etc.) or sometimes fewer notes than I am playing, and it dutifully slaps all that it thinks it hears into the notation it is creating on the fly. In addition to showing you the notation of what you just played (or what it thinks you played), Music Master Works will replay it for you using the midi instrument of your choice. So if you try to record your rendition of Ashokan Farewell as notation and ask Music Master Works to play it back, it could end up sounding like a badly damaged \$3 music box.

But with patience, I'm getting Music Master Works fine-tuned, and it is turning out some notation that makes sense to me. It's a \$34.95

addition that not everybody will love, but it's a lot cheaper than some of the high-dollar music notation software that claims to do the same thing. And it works very nicely as a stand-alone notation creator and editor, letting you use a midi keyboard—or your computer keyboard—for input.

It works on tuning guitars and mandolins and possibly even banjos, but it's us fretless folks who sometimes need that extra help on intonation.

The bottom line is this: if you keep your fiddle anywhere near your computer, In-Tune could be one of your best investments in intonation and ear training.

At least, that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

PS: There is free or cheap software out there that will convert midi files into tab. With the right combination of cheap tools and patience, you can record your playing and give your friends and neighbors the tab for it. □

WANTED: Newsletter Editor

Friends, I have thoroughly enjoyed editing this newsletter. Through it, I've made some excellent friends and learned a great deal about old-time music. Nevertheless, my year is almost up. Besides, editing this thing is hard work, and it's cutting into my practice time—which, as you well know, I desperately need.

Starting July 1, a new slate of officers will take the helm at Notsba, and one of those new officers will be the newsletter editor.

If you would like to be considered for the job, let Ed, Don, me, or any other member of the board know. I promise to do everything I can to help you turn out your first issue.

Phil Sparks

Please Contribute to Your Newsletter!

If you have information you want to submit, or if you have ideas for improving the newsletter, contact Phil Sparks.

If you are willing to review a CD or a book, contact Phil Sparks. If you don't contact him, he will contact you!

If you have a tidbit on picking, learning

tunes, caring for instruments, etc, please submit it for the "A Penny Learned" article.

HELP!!!! If you know about an upcoming old-time music event, don't assume that we already know about it. If it's not posted on our Web site (www.nashvilleoldtime.org), we need the information desperately. ***Please help us keep our old-time community informed.***

You can reach Phil at:

kpsparks@msn.com

or

615-797-4356

or

2020 Claylick Road

White Bluff, TN 37187

The *submission deadline* for *July's newsletter* is *Monday, June 27*.

Editor's Note: The articles in this newsletter are placed according to when they are submitted. The first article I receive is placed at the top, the second goes next, and so on.

Classified Ads

Rules: All ads must somehow relate to old-time music and our activities (YES: acoustical instruments, tuners, cases, camping gear, etc. NO: electrical instruments, cars, homes, pets, etc). Ads will be accepted on a first-come, first-served basis as space allows. If you want an ad to run in more than one issue, you must resubmit it each month. If your item sells, you are invited, but not required, to make a small donation to Notsba.

These rules will be revised as experience dictates.

FOR SALE: Plastic fiddle. It is set up with ebony pegs and nut and a 4-fine-tuner tail piece and includes a case and a bow.

This fiddle is ideal for rough camping and hiking. It will even double as a walking stick or canoe paddle ☺, \$150 firm. Contact Phil Sparks, 615-797-4356 or kpsparks@msn.com.