

# Fiddling in America: History Meets the Devil's Instrument

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The fiddle can arguably be regarded as the national musical instrument of the United States of America. Virtually every ethnic group arriving in America from any region of the planet, Europeans, Africans and Asians, has a long tradition of playing the violin or some form of 'fiddle,' including the first Americans who arrived thousands of years before Europeans. As just one example among the people of the first nations, "The Apache of the Southwest make a one- or two-string instrument called *tsii'edo'a'tl* (which they term a violin in English) from the hollow stalk of an agave plant; the instrument can be played in social and ceremonial contexts as well as for personal enjoyment." (Native American Music). One of the most important common threads among all the different nationalities and ethnicities that make up cultural stew that we call America is, for lack of a better term, fiddling.

The term *fiddle* itself comes from antiquity, and its sourcing is unclear. The Online Etymology Dictionary places the earliest appearances of the word in its various forms, "*fedele, fydyl, fidel*, earlier *fithele*, from Old English *fiðele* "fiddle," which is related to Old Norse *fiðla*, Middle Dutch *vedele*, Dutch *vedel*, Old High German *fidula*, German *Fiedel*, "a fiddle," in the 14th century. This source further explains that this name is probably derived from the Medieval Latin word *vitula*, "stringed instrument," and most likely related to the Latin word *vitularia*, meaning to "celebrate joyfully." Another theory states that the term is derived from the word *fidil*,

which referred to a three-stringed bowed instrument that was played during recitation of epic poems and stories. Whatever the source of the term, starting hundreds of years ago and continuing today, the word *fiddle* generally refers to any bowed instrument used to play folk or popular music, as opposed to established classical forms of music. As a verb, the term *fiddle* has the meaning of “to act nervously, make idle movements, move the hands or something held in them in an idle, ineffective way,” in other words, to waste one’s time absentmindedly doing something meaningless with one’s hands (fiddle). Ouch!

Meaningless though it may often be, fiddling continues to be a passion in North America (and all over the world, for that matter), and looking at its varieties and playing styles can double as a kind of tour through much of the shared history and culture of the USA. Our starting point will be the European immigration to North America taking place in the period just prior to the establishment of the United States as a unified national entity.

### **Celtic (Irish) Fiddling**

Our tour of American fiddling starts with Celtic music. Celtic music has a long history, as long as the history of the Celtic people, which extends back in time for thousands of years. Recent scholars are suggesting that the origins of the Celts are in Central Europe. Philologist John Cook uses linguistics as well as ancient texts, including the writings of Herodotus of Greece (c. 484 to c. 425 B.C.E), to map out the progress of the Celtic people as they moved steadily westward into region of Britain, Ireland and Northern France (Hall, 2016). What we now think of as Celtic Music came into being quite a bit later, just within the last 200 to 300 years.

Musician Mick Maloney (A Brief History, 2008) explains that the in-

struments we now associate with Celtic music, fiddle, flute, accordion, concertina, bodhran, cittern, banjo, guitar, etc. were all adopted at different times during the last few centuries. Celtic music has become a linchpin of Celtic identity, something collectively shared by all people who view themselves as Celts. As Maloney points out,

“A lot of the songs are about our history, and we have a great saying in Ireland, ‘Those in power write the history and those who suffer write the songs. And we’ve written a fair share of songs, but a lot of our songs represent our history because in times of Irish history there were very outlets for people to express one’s point of view.’”

Maloney also outlines the historical connection between Irish music and American music. He explains,

“Irish music has influenced American music in a variety of ways, when you think of Irish migrations to America in the 18th century. These immigrants brought their music with them there and interacted with English and Scottish and African Americans which in turn led to the emergence of Bluegrass and Country music, so when you listen to all those musics, you hear an Irish strain.”

Celtic fiddle playing is very distinctive. No less a fiddling luminary than Kevin Burke, one of the most popular and well-regarded players of Irish fiddle today, explains the distinctiveness in this way,

“An Irish tune when written is usually kept quite simple, a skeleton version, and it’s up to players to “flesh it out” with their own ideas and variations, ornaments etc. Because the tunes often change from

player to player I think the written versions are deliberately kept vague in case being too specific allows them to become "static". The changing nature of the tunes is part of the charm of this kind of music" (Irish Fiddle).

Ornamentation is the key and includes fingering and bowing techniques such as *the cut*, a grace between two of the same note played successively, *the double cut*, like *the cut* but done with two notes instead of one, *the long roll* and *the short roll*, a series of sequential notes jammed into the space of one or two beats within a measure, and *the slide*, in which a fiddler enters a note by sliding into it from below the note. Mastering these techniques takes time and effort, and without them, the fiddling will not sound authentic. Common forms of 'fiddle tunes' in Celtic are based on the dances that they are meant to accompany, including reels (4/4 time), hornpipes (dotted 4/4 time), various forms of jigs (6/8 time, 12/8 time, 9/8 time), polkas (2/4 time) and aires (slow 4/4 time). This is the style and these are the tune types that made their way to America in the 17th and 18th centuries (Irish Fiddle).

### **Old Time String Band Fiddling (also called 'Mountain Music')**

Geographically, the Appalachian mountains extend from Alabama in the south to Canada in the north, culturally Appalachia is located in the central and southern areas of the mountain range, from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia to the Great Smoky Mountains. Currently, this area has a population of about 25 million people.

Beginning in the late 19th century, Appalachia began to be recognized as a distinct region with a distinct cultural identity. This identity was generally negative due to 'yellow journalism,' which often focused on the 'isolation, temperament and behavior of its inhabitants,' focusing on "sensa-

tional aspects of the regions culture such as moonshining and clan feuding, and often portrayed the region's inhabitants as uneducated, violent and other derogatory stereotypes" (Sepehr, 2019).

The ancestors of today's Appalachian people first started to move to the area of the English colonies in the 1730's from England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Germany. For the most part, the Appalachian people are considered to be descendants of the Scotch-Irish. The Scotch-Irish are an identifiable group of people that came about as a result of policies of King James I of Britain, who decided to give rebellious Scots land in Ireland, a place which was also rebellious. By giving Scots free land in Ireland, James could cause two of the ethnic groups that were fighting against him to instead fight with each other, which naturally they did. At the same time, the Scots and Irish also intermarried and in time joined their communities together, and to some extent became one ethnic admixture. One hundred years later, these Scotch-Irish were motivated to immigrate to England's American colonies because of poverty, lack of economic opportunity and lack of personal and religious freedom at home in Britain (Mathew, 2019). Of course, as mentioned above, they brought their music with them. The Scottish and Irish songs, tunes, instruments and dances became the basis for Old Time String Band Music, a type of music in which the fiddle was the main instrument.

Appalachian fiddling owes a lot to Celtic fiddling in terms of the forms of tunes that are played (mostly reels and hornpipes) and how 'fiddle tunes' are structured (generally A-A-B-B, two parts of 8 measures, each repeated twice), but also differs markedly in style with regard to fingering and bowing. Gone are most if not all of the distinctive techniques of ornamentation we see in Celtic fiddling, replaced by hard driving shuffle bowing meant to provide a strong, propulsive rhythm for dancers. This dispensing with the more ornamental aspects of expression is mostly due

to the generally faster playing done in Appalachian music. Old timey fiddlers generally use a 'short bow' technique in which notes are played with individual bow strokes and bowing is generally confined to one area of the bow, usually from the middle of the bow to the tip. This style of playing is driving and aggressive in addition to being intense and exciting.

### **Texas Contest Style and Western Swing (or Country Music) Fiddling**

Fiddling in the United States portion of North America can generally be divided into two main types, Old Timey (Appalachian) fiddling and Texas style fiddling. The origins of these two styles are shared, but the approach and the sounds produced can be very different. Texas style fiddling is inextricably linked to fiddle contests, which themselves are a long-standing tradition in the Southern and Western United States, particularly in Texas. The earliest recordings of Texas fiddling date from the 1920s, notably the recordings of Eck Robertson from 1922 and 1929, but newspaper articles of the mid-19th century provide evidence of the popularity of fiddling in Texas, including stories that refer to American hero Davey Crockett playing fiddle during the famous battle of the Alamo between Mexico and the US in 1836 (Haigh).

Fiddle contests have been conducted in North America since before the establishment of the USA in the late 18th century, but until the mid 20th century were loosely conducted in terms of rules and standards for the performances. Chris Haigh, professional fiddler and author, explains,

“From around the 1950’s a new crop of contests was established with a new and stricter set of rules,” and that, “In this new era when technique, clarity and tone were all that really counted, and where furthermore players from the whole nation could compete together, different regional styles were pitted against one another. As the most

elaborate, flashy and refined of all the fiddle styles, Texas style, by a process almost of Darwinian evolution, came out on top.”

First of all, Texas fiddle playing is characterized by playing tunes at a slower pace, including the same tunes played at breakneck speed by Old Timey or Appalachian players. Texas style players use a ‘long bow’ style in which many notes are slurred together within one stroke of the bow, leading to a smoother, more legato expression. Additionally, elaborate ornamentation is put back into tunes, with triplets and slides used extensively. An important characteristic is improvisation on the basic melody of a tune. Unlike Old Time fiddling, in which the tune is played the same way in all repetitions, Texas style players will improvise around the melody to provide variation while maintaining a sense of the basic melody. This is entertaining for listeners and displays the player’s creative skills. Structural variations of tunes are also a characteristic of Texas style, playing tunes with three to five or even more parts, rather than the limited A-A-B-B parts standard to Old Time fiddling.

### **Cajun Fiddling**

Cajun fiddling, while not as well-known or often performed as the Appalachian Old Time style or Texas Contest style, is still a significant type of fiddling in its own right. This style is closely linked to the history of the French speaking Acadian (Cajun) people, and in fact is an important part of their cultural identity.

Cajun is a name for a distinct group of French-derived people, their culture, their dialect of French, their cuisine, their way of life and most importantly, their music. The word Cajun is derived from the word Acadian, which refers to the French settlers who lived in the Acadia region of what is now parts of Quebec and Nova Scotia in Canada and Maine in the USA.

Acadia was established in 1604 as a colony of New France in northeastern North America. For the next one hundred years the Acadians continually fought with the British army, which wanted to control the area. In 1710, the British largely conquered the Acadians, but Acadians continued to fight against the British until the time of 1755 to 1763, during which thousands of Acadians were forced to leave the area and go to Louisiana, which was then under the control of Spain. From the 1760s to the 1780s Acadians continued to move to Louisiana. Louisiana was purchased by the United States in 1803 and it became a state in 1812. In 1971, the Louisiana State Legislature officially recognized 22 parishes (a designation similar to a county in other states) as 'The Heart of Acadiana,' the Cajun region. In this region, for the last 250 years the Cajun people have maintained their culture and their ethnic identity. Of course, this identity includes their music, a type of music which also prominently features the fiddle as a primary instrument (Cajuns).

Cajun fiddling outwardly appears to be similar to Old Time fiddling, but reveals its distinct nature when given closer inspection. The guiding principle of Cajun fiddling seems to have always been to be as loud as possible, leading to extensive use of double-stops and hard, driving bowing, usually in *detache* 'shuffle' stroke. Cajun fiddling has historically made use of alternate tunings such as GDGB in order better play with diatonically limited instruments like the C button accordion. Cajun tunes are generally divided into two types, lively two-steps (2/4 time) and waltzes (3/4), and these tunes and the songs that are sung to them come from a French repertoire that is distinct from the Anglo-Irish sourcing of the tunes commonly played by Old Time or Texas style fiddlers. Songs are sung in the peculiar type of French spoken in the Cajun area of Louisiana, and hearing Cajun music generally has the effect of propelling the listener out of his or her chair and onto the dance floor. The influence of Cajun fiddling is often



seen in more mainstream Country music, including such eternal hits as *Jambalaya* by Hank Williams.

### **Other Significant Fiddle Styles in North America: African American Blues Fiddling, Canadian Maritime Fiddling and Mexican Mariachi and Norteno fiddling**

African Americans have a long tradition of fiddling going back to the beginning of the presence of African people in North America, including throughout the period of slavery from the late 1600s to Emancipation in 1863. In the 19th century, African American fiddling was an integral part of Minstrel shows that were a mainstay of popular entertainment, and in the 20th century African American players were vital in popularizing blues as a genre. Free improvisation is a key component of this style of fiddling.

At the same time, Celtic fiddling continued to prosper and evolve in the Eastern provinces of Canada, notably the Maritimes. This area continues to produce excellent fiddlers who carry on a type of fiddling that most closely adheres to traditional Celtic fiddle style. For aficionados of Celtic fiddling, among indigenous forms of fiddling in North America, Maritime fiddling is as close as one can get.

Another fiddling tradition that has had significant impact on fiddling in the Southwest of the United States is the fiddling of Mexican Mariachis and fiddlers in the fusion style of Norteno, which includes, along with Mexican forms such as corrido, cancion and ranchera, polkas and waltzes, tunes forms derived from Northern Europe, creating a hybrid of Mexican and Germanic music which has been extremely popular in Northern Mexican and the neighboring areas of the US. Fiddling in the Mariachi style is immediately identifiable, if not easily replicated by non-Mexican players. Notable also is the more common and very facile use of pizzicato among

Mexican players. Were space not an issue, these more peripheral styles of American fiddling would merit much closer inspection. Suffice it to say that fiddling in America is a rich and varied tapestry of styles, traditions and approaches to musical expression, and it's well worth going into greater depth than just listening to Turkey in the Straw.

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