

# The Crooked Road Meets the Conservatory

By Sarah Jane Nelson



Photo: Karen Singer Jabbour

*Alan Jabbour and Austin Freer, Tryon, North Carolina, Jan. 24, 2006*

I first started thinking about the cultural phenomenon of traditional music in conservatory settings while participating in the much-anticipated Annual Lowell Banjo & Fiddle Contest in Massachusetts. I'd be warming up for my moment on stage when my fiddle partner would pause mid-tune to exclaim—"uh oh, here come those Berklee kids! We don't stand a chance." And sure enough, "those Berklee kids" would often bag first place in the contest—and for good reason. The passion of these young players goes well beyond technique.

I started to ask myself whether traditional music could be taught in a formal setting, or whether it would, simply put, lose its character. During a bowing workshop at Fiddle Hell weekend in Concord, Massachusetts, Mark Simos, an Assistant Professor at Berklee College, described his "day" job this way: "I get to teach brilliant young musicians the mysteries of playing extremely simple music and finding out that it isn't as simple as it sounds." Mark has a way with words. Sure, a typical Anglo-American fiddle tune might have about 32 bars of music—with two or three short melodic sections --but how do you make music out of that? During the Fiddle Hell workshop Simos used a multi-sensory approach to old time fiddling that he employs both inside and outside the walls of the conservatory. He engaged his students' sense of sight as well as the more customary ear training to get to "the deeper parts of old time music." "I think of bowing in old time music like I'm a painter using a paint brush. Sometimes I want to have a certain kind of brush stroke to create a certain kind of effect," Simos said. "The bow is always making a little commentary on that tune and every time you bow it differently you're bringing out a commentary on the shape of that melody."

A lot of what Simos and Berklee colleagues Bruce Molsky and Darol Anger have been working at over the years is to bring the "natural" world of fiddling into the classroom. This is a musically intense distillation process, a focusing of the lens that you might not find anywhere else. The people who are part of Berklee's Roots Music Program have thought about this music for a long, long time, and have a knack for articulating these experiences.

What happens when significant numbers of music students put aside their Brahms and Mozart scores to close their eyes and listen to traditional fiddle tunes? Eric Merrill is a young fiddler whose *Western Star* liner notes were written by Dirk Powell, no less, and who straddles both the world of traditional hand-me-down music and conservatory training at Indiana Conservatory. I asked him whether classically-trained students are changing traditional music? According to Merrill, "there is definitely a trend in old time music towards clean playing—precision of articulation. I lean that way—but," he added, "you can have that without classical training."

Performer, researcher, and writer Alan Jabbour, who began his musical career as a classical violinist well before he went the way of Henry Reed and Tommy Jarrell, says that while Berklee College has an incredibly "strong depth of commitment to folk music...the same trend is showing up in universities. East Tennessee State University has a significant bluegrass and old time program providing both academic training and school of music-style training for musicians and music educators." Other examples include the University of North Carolina-Greensboro's School of Music, which boasts two ethnomusicologists and an old time music class



Photo: [www.berklee.edu](http://www.berklee.edu)

Mark Simos



Photo: David Bragger

Brad Leftwich

that Jabbour has coached. In addition, “the phenomenon of public school orchestras playing old time music...in Shetland, Scotland, and Canada, is popping up now in the South—notably the successful JAM program (Junior Appalachian Musicians) in several Appalachian counties.”

Jabbour commented that for years his camp and workshop students came from “just about everywhere except from the world of classically-trained music. But this is the generation during which the classically-trained musicians are suddenly showing up in great numbers in my workshops. It’s a really significant cultural phenomenon.” And, he added, “the conservatories and music schools aren’t causing it, they are reflecting it, though inevitably they are beginning to influence it, too.”

It is just this influence that gives some purveyors of traditional music cause for concern: fiddler and teacher Brad Leftwich had this to say about the university setting: “What you lose in the ‘violinization’ of traditional fiddling is the quirky individuality of the old non-literate musicians, playing scales with neutral tones and other non-standard intonation, often on cheap, poorly-maintained instruments and without formal training. A lot of us who grew up with it learned to love that sound; it was like the crackled patina on ancient works of art.”

Leftwich is concerned that “with the modern, classically-trained players, it’s like the patina has been cleaned off and the works are all polished up. It’s still great art, but we miss the patina.” But he also recognizes the benefit of this polishing process: “It makes it more accessible to mainstream tastes. I’m actually glad for the talented role models who can attract players to old time.” Who does Brad listen to? “When I have a choice of what to listen to in my CD player or iPod, I’ll usually choose those quirky older players like Tommy Jarrell, Melvin Wine, and Ernie Carpenter. They never cease to amaze me.”

All through the writing of this story I kept asking myself and others, “where is the field for study of old time music nowadays, and is there still a field to go to?” I got as many answers to that as there are musicians. Jabbour, the consummate scholar, said that “there’s always a field to research,” and he later went on to add that the teachers themselves might constitute this field. I wasn’t sure what that meant until I pressed Mark Simos to explain his proposed “field initiative.” Mark explained that he would like to start a video archive of American Roots music teachers so that instructors could begin to converse about teaching techniques and approaches. Both for students and teachers alike, Simos is a strong believer in learning through observation as well as practice. “Look at the fingers and bow arm of the people you’re observing...that’s how people in this tradition learn...through osmosis, using your eyes and your ears.”

East Tennessee State University’s Bluegrass, Old Time and Country Music Studies program has been around since 1982. They currently offer literally dozens of classes in this music, from guitar maintenance and harmony singing to clawhammer banjo and fiddle harmony. In speaking to fiddle harmony instructor Colleen Trenwith, who’s now on ETSU’s faculty, I also began to see another possible shift in the location of the “field.” While it might not be on people’s front porches, parlors or kitchens, for many musicians, it has sunk its roots deep into academic soil.

Says Trenwith, “I know that not everyone would agree with traditional music being taught or passed on at a university, when it has always been passed down from generation to generation within the community. My own observation is that it is working amazingly well, when I look at the wide variety of students who arrive, spend four years immersed in the studies, and leave as different people. For local students who come from mountain families in East Tennessee, music is a part of their lives. A lot of these students learn for the first time how important their music is to the rest of the world. ...They learn about themselves. They learn to take pride in their music, and that they have a ‘voice’.”

I asked Trenwith if the university setting changes the music, “I have not seen that...the music is being analyzed and broken down



*Colleen Trenwith*



*Eric Merrill*



*Bruce Molsky*

*Photo: Ben Mund*

into phrases repeated over and over until learned...that's something that happens 'in the community' when a friend or relative is passing on a tune to another."

Almost everyone seems to agree that the most influential teachers and performers know the stories and settings behind the music they're playing. It's a phenomenon I call "playing from the bottom of the well." It's something you pick up on, almost viscerally, when you hear someone play. Some of the people who are the most articulate about the history and cultural background behind traditional music come from outside the folk music culture. Colleen Trenwith is a native New Zealander who, like Jabbour, started life as a classical player. When she arrived at East Tennessee State University, she not only took performance classes but also immersed herself in Appalachian Studies, both inside and outside the university walls. She went to jam sessions, church and family gatherings. "This helped me to understand where the music fits in the lives of the folk here, and also how important it has always been to them, right from the time they first settled in America."

Bruce Molsky, an Associate Professor in the String Department at Berklee, echoes this sentiment: "Students need to know historically how music was played, when it was played, where it was played, and how it was viewed...it's where the depth and beauty come from." Back at Fiddle Hell, Simos had tried to convey the story behind old time fiddling: "The fiddle often had to be its own rhythm instrument...sometimes a single fiddle had to play solo for twelve hours, from nighttime until dawn."

Molsky continued with this theme during his master class at Berklee this past spring: "Melody is almost an excuse for the rhythm." For classical players, this would be a new idea. Bruce's ensemble class this past spring consisted of approximately seven students

who had been "handpicked by the faculty." There were two guitar players, one five-string banjo player, one mandolin player, and the rest on fiddles. He built a lot of listening time into this class, knowing that some of the players would never have been exposed to the old stuff before, and that regional differences in particular take a long time to sink in. He talked a lot about Round Peak playing and the importance of rhythm in this music. During the two hours that I was there, he played recordings from the Camp Creek Boys, Kyle Creed, and many others.

Molsky shared this story of initial encounters with old time music: "One classical student I worked with had a roommate who loved listening to Tommy Jarrell. She hated it, thought it was just awful stuff. Her roommate forced her to come to one of my workshops. She observed all these guys playing out of tune and realized, 'you play out of tune but you do it all the time.' He was thrilled with this observation. "Quarter tone, half-tone intonation differences are regional, and all part of the music."

One of the students who participated in the Berklee ensemble class is fiddler Jen Starsinic. I asked her if she could have learned all of her performance skills outside of a college setting: "Berklee has been like this big magnet that has drawn all these excellent folk musicians to Boston and we all hang out and jam all the time. I've learned as much from my peers on the weekends as I have at school during the week. I look at the vibrant music community that has largely been created because of the Roots Program at Berklee, and I think that it's just like the kind of circumstances that folk music has always thrived in...consisting of people who completely love and respect the musical traditions from which they come."

*[Sarah Jane Nelson is a writer, musician and educator based in Southern New Hampshire. She is a longtime member of Gypsy Minor and her piano vamping, fluting, and fiddling can be heard regularly at folk festivals and contra dances across New England. She also enjoys bringing old tunes and new songs to life as part of the duo Banjos & Old Lace.]*