

Allan Block: *Marking a Time Gone By*

By Sarah Jane Nelson

Dance fiddler and musical mentor Allan Block passed away in October 2013 in Franconia, New Hampshire, after a long illness. For many of us who crossed paths with this complex and charismatic man, his passing marked not only the loss of another great fiddler, but yet another farewell to an extraordinary period in the history of the folk music revival. The music and stories Allan shared provided a rare window into the lives of those who lived in Greenwich Village during the late 1950s and 1960s. During the best years of his life, Allan and his fiddle exerted a positively magnetic force at such festivals as Indian Neck, Fox Hollow, and Old Songs, where he was always surrounded by an enthusiastic circle of friends and admirers.

Author, performer, and Appalachian dulcimer historian Ralph Lee Smith first hooked up with Allan in the 1960s when Allan established his Sandal Shop on 171 West 4th Street in Greenwich Village, New York. In his Mel Bay book, *Greenwich Village, The Happy Folk Singing Days*, Smith paints a vivid (if somewhat idealized) picture of life in the Village at that time:

In 1957, I moved into a tiny apartment on Jones Street... right outside my window, Allan Block's Sandal Shop was becoming a gathering place for people who were re-discovering old-time mountain music and were teaching themselves to play it....On a typical Saturday morning in summer, I would wake up to the sounds of the street coming in through the open living room windows...In the afternoon, I would take my dulcimer and cross the street, where Allan Block's glorious fiddle playing could already be heard emanating from the open doors of the Sandal Shop...Through the afternoon, we played and sang. Players drifted in and out, while Allan alternately played, outlined customers' feet on pieces of cardboard...and hammered rivets into sandals.

In 1970 Allan and Smith were invited to record with a little record company called Meadowlands Records. This album, simply entitled *Allan Block and Ralph Lee Smith*, includes tunes and songs that were recorded both live at the Indian Neck Festival and at the New York University radio station. As noted in Ralph's Greenwich Village book, this "is the only record ever made that flowed directly out of the music played in Allan Block's Sandal Shop in the 1960s." As seen through the eyes of Smith, and many others, Allan's shop, along with several coffee houses and Izzy Young's Folklore Center on MacDougal Street, formed the center of the folk music revival scene.

Allan wasn't always a bohemian leather worker playing fiddle in the streets of New York. He started life back in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, as a classically-trained violinist who, at the age of eleven



A 1961 jam session at Allan Block's sandal shop. Rob Hunter, banjo; Ray Boguslav, guitar; Allan Block, fiddle; Ramblin' Jack Elliot, in the black hat.

Photo by Marvin Lichtner, courtesy of Rob Hunter.

or twelve, became accomplished enough to play Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor over the Madison airwaves. But after moving to New York he caught the folk music bug and made a swift transformation vividly described by his second daughter, renowned blues artist Rory Block, in her fascinating online *Life Story*:

One day when I was twelve my father walked in the door and exclaimed that he met an old farmer in the street selling corn. He unrolled a piece of paper that revealed four fat ears of farm fresh corn. He told us he wouldn't be playing "violin" anymore, but a new style called "Old Timey" which he learned about from this farmer. He took the instrument from its case and announced that from now on this was a "fiddle." He demonstrated the style, which was scratchy and bouncy.

The seed for this musical shift, however, had been planted long ago. As a child, Allan loved to listen to weekend radio programs of "Music Americana" as he called it. 1920s "pop music" artists included people like Al Jolson, Rudy Vallee and Big Crosby, or musician/entertainers like Eddie Cantor and Jack Benny. In addition, the first job Allan got after World War II was working for \$38



a week at People’s Artists, an organization that brought folk artists to New York from all over the country. Allan did clerical work in the office while being exposed to the music of Pete Seeger, Leadbelly, Sonny Terry, Doc Watson, Clarence Ashley, and Dock Boggs. He particularly loved the sound of Ashley’s high tenor voice.

The swinging rhythms of this earlier music ran like a thread through Allan’s bow arm, so that his take on old time music had a drive that was uniquely and recognizably his own. Before Allan became a mentor to so many other younger musicians, he steeped himself in traditional music.

New Lost City Ramblers band member and film maker John Cohen of the iconic documentary *High Lonesome Sound* got a hold of Allan early on; once John found out Allan played the violin, he started dropping off cassette tapes at the shop, and insisting that Allan listen to them. When John first met Allan “he was a folk singer...I was trying to steer him away from being a folk singer and show him the richness of old time fiddle music and string bands...I did this with a lot of people, but Allan was always there in the shop so I knew where I could find him.”

Allan was particularly taken with Mike Seeger’s banjo playing, and started rehearsing with the Ramblers on a regular basis. He was invited to go on tour with his new musical friends, but decided to stay home in New York and tend his sandal shop. Given his prodigious musical talent, Allan swiftly changed from old time music student to mentor—albeit an often demanding one—to younger musicians. Allan did not tread lightly as the leader of the old time pack: no one better describes this, once again, than his daughter Rory:

Bursting with enthusiastic musicians and fans, the players and spectators literally spilled out onto the sidewalk while the center of the room steamed up from the intensity of the music as my father held court and directed. Everyone knew his thing was “holding down the beat,” and from time to time an excited musician would receive a gruff reprimand as my father snapped, “Speeding up!” while casting a grave eye at the offender. One then had to pay sharper attention to his stomping foot, which pounded out the beat like Big Ben, seemingly setting the standard for worldwide time.

By the early 1970s, Allan had left the tending of his Greenwich Village shop to his children, and established a leather business in the quaint, white-clapboarded town of Frankestown, New Hampshire. It was during this time that he became acquainted with New England dance halls. On Saturday nights he made it his business to sit in with more experienced dance musicians—particularly those who made up the Canterbury Country Dance Orchestra. He rapidly established his reputation with dance callers like Ralph Page, Dudley Laufman, and Duke Miller, and was soon lead fiddler at dances across New England.

Those of us who sat in with him at dances found him alternately entertaining (Allan had an eccentric sense of humor that often caught one off guard), exacting, and inspiring. He did not hesitate to share his strong opinions on how dance music should be played, and he kept a keen eye on the dance leaders as well; as remarked during a two-day interview with friend and folklorist Jeff Todd Titon: dance callers need to be “extroverted, erudite, have a love of music, a strong rhythmic sense, and be able to read the situation on the floor.”

During the late 1970s and 1980s, young fiddlers regularly made the pilgrimage to Allan’s Frankestown farmhouse for lessons on life and music. A study in contrasts, Allan never left the city far behind; by the early 1980s he started traveling down to the Boston area once a week to give group lessons in Arlington or Cambridge. There he built a strong community of old time musicians, many of whom were—in contrast to their instructor—white-collar professionals. The students he taught remain fast friends to this day, and regularly meet up at annual fiddle gatherings like the Harry Smith Frolic in Massachusetts, the Lake Genero Fiddlin’ Bear in Pennsylvania, and the Black Creek Fiddlers Reunion in New York.

Allan seemed to thrive on dualities, and while he sometimes projected the image of a country bumpkin, he was in fact a deeply learned man who (unbeknownst to many of his musician friends and acquaintances) was also an accomplished poet. His written works were direct reflections of his complexity, wit, and sensuality, and appeared in many national publications. He authored two books, *Noah’s Wake* (1972) and a second collection, *Unopened Mail* (2001).

Allan’s multi-faceted life as an artist and craftsman did not always dovetail neatly with his life as a husband and father. Married several times, and the father of three, one need only look at Rory Block’s autobiography, *When a Woman Gets the Blues*, to get a picture of Allan’s failings as a father and the difficulties he had in his personal life. Rambler member John Cohen was particularly apt in describing Allan’s “elusive” qualities: “He wasn’t reliable in the traditional sense...but when he had a friend he was attached to, he would leave and come back.” Added Cohen, “He [lived] on the thin edge economically. He wanted to be free like a piece of paper blowing around...” Says Cohen, much of Allan’s personal charm could also be attributed to the fact that “he lived in the present...it’s very difficult to live in our society that way.”

Multi-instrumentalist and music educator John Kirk was a student at Fredonia College in New York in 1978 when he first met Allan. When Allan first heard John play, “he looked me right in the eye, took me by the arm and said, ‘you’ve got it.’” This meant the

world to the young Kirk who ended up going on his first musical road tour with Allan and George Wilson. Allan called John on the phone one night: “I want you go on tour with George and I. We’ll feed you, clothe you, and I’ll make you a pair of sandals,” he characteristically promised. They got a pickup truck with a cap and stopped to play gigs in New York State, Illinois, West Virginia, Florida, and Pennsylvania before returning to Fredonia. “Between George and Allan I learned so much about playing.” Kirk affectionately referred to Allan’s playing as a “mongrel style of fiddling” made up of an amazing mixture. They played their way through the summers of the 1970s—sometimes in Washington Square Park—where the old time music reunion takes place each September.

Despite of or because of the many loose ends in his own personal life, Allan served as a sporadic father figure to many people outside his biological family. In 1980 when Kirk lost a close musician friend, Tom Stockton, he took a bus up to Peterborough, New Hampshire. Allan picked him up and brought him home. “I felt like I was going to see my father... When we got to Frankestown, he handed me a splitting mall and showed me how it was done—I spent a couple of days there splitting wood.” At one point Allan pulled Kirk aside and shared some home-grown wisdom: “See now, you’re at this wonderful age where you think going to festivals and playing tunes is real life, but this [he referred to the pile of wood] is real life.”

Allan’s life as a bohemian extended well beyond his Greenwich Village days. Those of us who spent time with Allan would hear fragmented tales of his life as a busker in St. Augustine, Florida. He would fiddle his way through several seasons of Frankestown dances and then would mysteriously disappear some time after December, not to resurface again until the third weekend in April, when he would park his VW bus in the overcrowded parking lot at the New England Folk Festival (NEFFA) in Natick, Massachusetts. He’d appear each morning at his leather craft table (most often with his son Paul) cheerful, slightly tanned, and disheveled, mentioning only that “I slept in the van last night. I’m on my way back from Florida.” And that’s all we really knew.

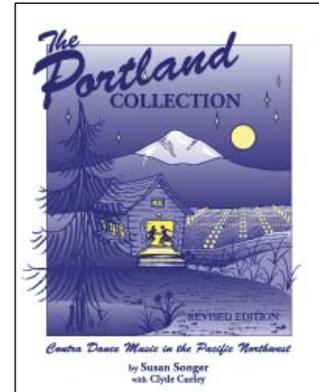
It wasn’t until his passing last October that I decided to get a little more information about Allan’s life on the southern coast. With little effort I managed to get 78-year-old Daniel Holiday on the phone. Dan enthusiastically recalled how Allan drifted mysteriously in and out of his life for some years.

Dan, who had been thinking about opening a leather shop since childhood, stumbled on Allan’s leatherworks store circa 1957 when he was passing through New York. In 1964 Holiday opened his own shop in the old part of St. Augustine when in walked Allan; Dan says he had an “unforgettable face,” so he recognized him immediately. One day Allan sat in front of Dan’s shop on a park bench made of two by fours and cinder blocks. He took out his fiddle and started to sing and play: “In one day he made \$100.” Allan basically moved in: he was content to make one or two pairs of sandals per week—in between the music making. “I stitched them up and Allan did the leatherwork.” Holiday greatly admired Allan’s craftsmanship and the two men formed an unstructured, ephemeral, but happy partnership.

According to Holiday, Allan would work out of the back door of the shop and sleep in his van each night, where, according to Holiday, he would also retreat to eat his habitual cucumber and pepper sandwiches. “I only saw him during the day.” Allan’s nightlife was his own. “Allan was a rare bohemian—not a hippy—a bohemian,” he joyously boomed at me over the phone. I asked Dan for a definition of terms: “Bohemians are apolitical, free-spirited...they don’t force their ‘isms’ on anyone. They have no agenda.” Said Holiday, with a mix of irony and admiration: “I don’t think Allan ever bought a new shirt in his life, but he always wore that white shirt and suspenders.”

Writer, song-chaser and musician Sarah Jane Nelson warmly recalls sitting in at Frances-town dances in her pre-fiddling days with Allan, who kindly put up with her “old time” flute playing. He played for her potluck wedding and left an indelible impression on her life as a musician.

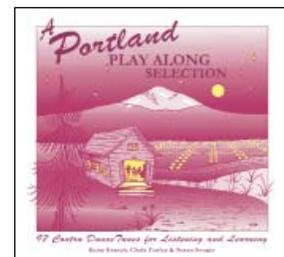
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