

Random acts of violins: Oliver Schroer and two British Columbia fiddle communities

Andy Hillhouse

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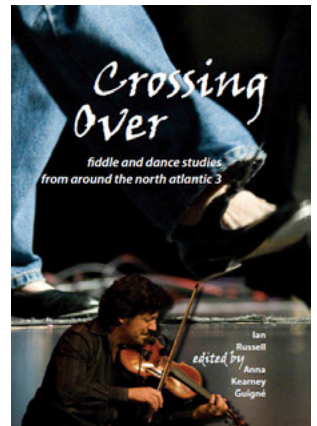
Crossing Over

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 3

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About the author:

Andy Hillhouse is currently a PhD candidate in ethnomusicology at the University of Toronto, where he is researching transnational folk musicians' networks, individualization, and post-revival collaborations. He travelled for many years as a professional guitarist and singer, and won a Juno Award in 2006 as a member of the McDades.

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Random acts of violins: Oliver Schroer and two British Columbia fiddle communities

ANDY HILLHOUSE

Oliver Schroer, who passed away on 3 July 2008, shortly after his 52nd birthday, was a prominent and unusual Canadian fiddler. His diverse audiences ranged from suburban folk festival patrons and rural British Columbian fiddle students to urban avant-garde music enthusiasts. As a musician, he was definitively difficult to define. His varied career as a producer, teacher, and composer, his idiosyncratic performance style, and his eccentric fashion sense earned him a reputation on the Canadian folk music scene as a maverick.¹

He was a prolific fiddle tune writer who drew on a wide variety of traditional and popular music forms for inspiration. Much of his work was very idiosyncratic,² although some of his tunes were quite accessible for fiddlers of various abilities, and some even had strong formal and stylistic referents to traditions such as Irish dance music and Cajun music. His tune titles often employed humorous wordplay or evoked a strong sense of place, enabling a connection with his audience even during his most avant-garde ventures. In addition to his solo work, and his work with his band the Stewed Tomatoes, he collaborated with musicians from, among other places, Finland, Italy, and Ireland.³ His self-identification, despite his contemporary image, cosmopolitanism, and tendency toward fusion and experimentation, was as a folk musician, a term that implies connection to place and historical continuity.⁴ Schroer's self-descriptions signified his simultaneous identification as both a folk fiddler and a composer with a unique voice. For instance, he once referred to himself as an 'extended folk musician',⁵ and he titled his collaborations with Italian accordionist Filippo Gambetta as 'folk music from nowhere', inverting the localism evoked by the term 'folk'.⁶

How does one culturally and theoretically situate such an idiosyncratic musician, who resists categorization and identification with any particular tradition, yet who consistently identified himself with folk music? Do identification with particular localities and notions of community continuity play a role in the life of a soloistic and cosmopolitan musician like Schroer? In this paper, I demonstrate that in order to address these questions it is informative to turn to his various musical relationships. Such a study sheds light not only on the values and ideals of the

individual, Oliver Schroer, but also on those with whom he collaborated. Schroer's work as a fiddle mentor to young people provides a case study through which to consider how notions of continuity and oral transmission, commonly researched aspects of folk music study, remain as signifiers of 'folk' and tradition even when a musician pursues stylistic distinctiveness. I will focus primarily on Schroer's alliances with two fiddle communities in British Columbia: the Youth Valley Fiddlers of Smithers and the Coast String Fiddlers of Roberts Creek. He worked with both of these communities closely as a mentor, from 2001 (at Smithers) and 2003 (at Roberts Creek) until his passing.

Alliance studies

I use the term 'alliance' deliberately, taking up Beverley Diamond's call for an 'alliance studies' approach in ethnomusicology. She explains the concept as follows:

What exactly might alliance studies be? It might look at ways that concepts and social relationships of the past are embedded in the present. Alliance studies might track connections to places, or networks of people. Such a focus would shift our attention to such things as genre formations, technological mediations, language and dialect choices, citational practices, and issues of access and ownership.⁷

I propose that the concept of alliances can be useful in studying those musicians like Schroer who seem to avoid categorization. Schroer is an example of how musicians utilize 'networks of people' through their collaborations to counter the expectations of particular 'genre formations'. Further, focusing on alliances is a way to understand how individuals construct their musical/social worlds, when there are many options open to them. What are the shared affinities and values that draw musicians together, when these affinities are not necessarily based on ethnic or regional identity? This question implies not only relationships among professional musicians but also those between professional and amateur musicians, such as those between Schroer and the communities at Smithers and Roberts Creek.

Alliance studies can also help address gaps in the research that are a result of the privileging of certain musics and regions by both academia and the music industry. As James Leary recently discussed in his analysis of the Wisconsin polkabilly band the Goose Island Ramblers, certain folk practices are politically selected as emblematic of large regions and nations, while other areas are 'minimized or ignored'.⁸ Leary argues that, in the United States, the music of the Upper Midwest is absent from the canon of great American folk and vernacular musics due in large part to its 'wildly combinatory' nature and the perception of it as 'too recent, too varied' and 'too fluid'.⁹ The syncretic music of the area historically has drawn on Norwegian, Métis, Finnish, German, Polish, and Irish dance music styles. According to Leary, it has received much less attention from American folklorists and ethnomusicologists than have Anglo-Celtic and African-American musics.¹⁰

Leary's work raises questions about the study of folk music in similarly ethnically diverse regions in Canada. Folk music practices in British Columbia, with its recent settlement of fishers, miners, and loggers from many of the same ethnic groups discussed in *Polkabilly*, have received relatively minimal attention outside of the late Phil Thomas's seminal work.¹¹ In terms of fiddling in particular, British Columbia is virtually absent in the literature. With a focus on processes of interaction between groups, music in ethnically diverse regions with fluid populations may take a more prominent place in research.

In the contemporary era, in which musicians often maintain multiple identities and fluctuate between them, it is important to develop ways to discuss both idiosyncratic musicians such as Schroer and emerging practices in places such as British Columbia, despite their lack of alignment with clearly defined, singular, and bounded traditions. By examining not only the music, but the kinds of values and ideals that are expressed through musician's alliances, it is possible to describe these musicians without having to place them into genre categories they may not agree with (for example 'Celtic' or 'Old Time').

Values and ideals

By tracking Schroer's alliances, one can identify where his values and ideals converge with or differ from those that guide the production of folk music elsewhere. An example is Schroer's expressed affinity with Finnish folk music.¹² Schroer collaborated with Finnish accordion player Maria Kalaniemi, an early graduate of the folk music programme at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki. His conceptualization of contemporary folk music shows some similarities with the philosophy that guides that programme. I use an excerpt of ethnomusicologist Juniper Hill's analysis of that institution as a starting point for an exploration of his ideals:

The legitimacy of Finnish contemporary folk music is founded on an ideal process of creating folk music, as well as an ideal way of being a folk musician and an ideal relationship of folk music to society. Finnish contemporary folk musicians believe that the most authentic approach to creating folk music is to attempt to enter into and continue the process of creating music by learning the tradition and using it as a foundation for their own personal creative expressions, incorporating whatever influences have touched their lives. Through this ideal process, they achieve another ideal: transforming folk music into a living tradition relevant to contemporary society; and they avoid their anathema, or 'anti-ideal,' the freezing of folk music as a museum piece.¹³

The notion of the transmission, through mentoring, of an ideal folk music process and a 'way of being' a folk musician resonates with my own interpretation of Schroer's relationship with the British Columbia fiddlers. The fact that the Sibelius programme incorporates free improvisation, collaborations with non-Finnish folk musicians, and original composition is very much a result of the values and ideals of those who founded the programme, according to Hill.¹⁴ What values and ideals did

Schroer transmit to his students, and what reciprocal effect did his engagement with them have on his work? Did Schroer model a 'way of being' a fiddler to his students, and if so, what was it?

In the public eye, the 'way of being' associated with Schroer involves the attributes of uniqueness and musical adventurousness. In a *Globe and Mail* obituary, Canadian folk musician Grit Laskin describes Schroer's playing: 'it was his own style—physically what he did with his bow technique and the kind of rhythms and structure in the music he wrote – there was nobody else like him'.¹⁵ From this description, and others like it, emerges a cluster of ideals and values: emancipation from authority, free expression of personality and openness to multiple influences. A contrasting cluster – rootedness in tradition, ties to place and social inclusiveness – are less often applied to Schroer, but these aspects played a part in much of his collaborations and teaching. Schroer's brother Andre, in the same article, expresses a similar perception of Oliver's uniqueness, but also makes mention of the notion of tradition: 'He was a very complex individual who in one way skewed authority [...] but still had one foot in traditions'.¹⁶ Indeed, dialectically operating sets of ideals coexist in much of Schroer's work as a performer and mentor. Whether in his early commitment to learning folk fiddle styles and subsequent striving for a personal style, his alternation between highly collaborative and completely soloistic albums, or his choice to record a CD of original tunes on a 1000 year old pilgrimage trail,¹⁷ the dialectical binaries of individualism/communalism and radical innovation/historical continuity are recurrent themes throughout his career. For example, he describes his transition from budding traditional fiddler to original tune composer in a letter written a little over a month before he died. Speaking of his discovery of traditional fiddling in his twenties, he writes:

First of all, it was music that was inclusive. Old and young could do it together. It knew no bounds in terms of socioeconomic or intellectual background [...] I was hooked. I got into that social aspect of music at first [...] A human connective thing. But I have a restless mind. So at a certain point, I wanted more than the traditional tunes. Even after delving into various world musics, I still heard something different in my mind's ear. So I started composing tunes.¹⁸

In the above quote, Schroer is pointing to an early stage in the arc in his development as a musician. Beginning his career by engaging with traditional music and associating himself with the 'human connective' aspect of it, he later felt the desire to pursue original composition. His entrance to teaching came after over a decade of developing a personal style. His mentoring presented an opportunity for him not only to transmit a personal legacy of tunes, but also, importantly, to engage in a process of cultural continuity at a face to face, grassroots level within these local communities, while transmitting the ideal of individual creativity represented by his solo work. I interpret his return to teaching as a personal negotiation of the

basic dialectic scholars have long associated with folk music and folk revival, that of community, continuity, and individual innovation.¹⁹ Schroer's response to this tension was to emphasize process over product – what one student referred to as transmitting a 'mindset as opposed to a repertoire'²⁰ – an approach that has much in common with that identified by Juniper Hill at the Sibelius Academy. In this respect his teaching differed greatly from fiddle music revivals that model themselves on collections of tunes and archival recordings that focus on particular localities and regions.²¹

Youth Valley Fiddlers and Coast String Fiddlers

Organizers of fiddle camps at Smithers and Roberts Creek embraced Schroer's approach enthusiastically. It is important, however, not to conflate these two communities; in fact they contrast in several ways. While Smithers is a rural farming community in the north of British Columbia (a 14-hour drive from the major provincial centre of Vancouver), Roberts Creek is in close proximity to Vancouver, reachable by a 40-minute ferry ride. It is semi-rural and less isolated than Smithers. The repertoire focus of both fiddle organizations also differs. While the bulk of Smithers Valley Youth Fiddlers repertoire has always been diverse, the Roberts Creek Coast String Fiddlers have a substantial Scottish influence. This is not reflective of a dominant ethnic identity in the broader community of Roberts Creek, but of the national origin of the founder of the Coast String Fiddlers, Ann Law, who predominantly hires Scottish teachers for the annual fiddle camp. Indeed, the Coast String Fiddlers have travelled to Scotland three times, and regularly wear tartan in performance. Despite these differences, both communities shared the practice of hiring fiddle teachers from outside the community to workshop or teach with the students, and both operate annual fiddle camps. The two fiddle communities also share some basic expressed ideological aspects, which bear mentioning.

Neither of the group's mission statements mentions the preservation or perpetuation of any single tradition as a goal. The Coast String Fiddlers' mandate is to 'play an international mix of fiddle music, including Scottish, Appalachian, Shetland and Finnish as well as compositions by Canadian Fiddlers and members of the group, some of which defy categorization'.²² The Valley Youth Fiddlers frame their mandate not in terms of repertoire but in terms of six aims: Community, Creativity, Family Focus, Learning, Performing, and Self Respect.²³ Regional, national or ethnic traditions are not mentioned on their website, while community and personal achievement are highlighted. Schroer's teaching methods, which involved strictly oral transmission of tunes, universal opportunity for improvisation, and ensemble arrangements that made use of students at all levels of ability, were certainly in keeping with the ideal of face to face interaction, the egalitarianism, and the valuing of individual creativity in both groups.

To highlight Schroer's affiliation with the aforementioned ideals is not to deny the possibility of competing notions of what constitutes the acceptable boundaries of tradition within the organization, or amongst fellow fiddle teachers at camps and

workshops. These teachers may transmit varied ideals of innovation, with diverse viewpoints loosely held together under the broad umbrella of the mission statement principles. In the case of Smithers in particular, Schroer was one of several teachers, but ultimately, according to Valley Youth Fiddlers founder Leslie Jean Macmillan, he had the strongest impact among them, partially due to an alignment of his ideals and values with the organization.²⁴ In Roberts Creek, where there is a stronger emphasis on Scottish style, according to one student he had less of an influence and was less involved, although he remains a celebrated figure in the community.²⁵

Truffles, Smithers, and Twisted String: creativity, continuity and diversity

Three notable projects that emerged from Schroer's connection to these British Columbian fiddle communities embody the above-mentioned ideals of individual creativity and face-to-face interaction. These are *Truffles*,²⁶ his compositional work, and resultant CD, with children in the Smithers area, the album *Smithers*,²⁷ a CD of tunes he composed for fiddle students there, and the Twisted String, which involved youth from Roberts Creek and Smithers.

Truffles was what Schroer called an 'ongoing composition project' that began with twenty-minute workshops with youth between the ages of 7 and 17 in Smithers in 2004. The goal of the workshops was for each child to compose a fiddle tune, and in the words of Schroer, to build 'a tradition of composing for fun and self expression'.²⁸ Elsewhere he reveals an interest in facilitating community continuity. He wrote on the liner notes of the *Truffles* CD, 'By the end of a week, I had a pile of eighteen new tunes written by the kids. That is already the start of a common repertoire – a living tradition – the Smithers fiddle tradition in the making.' Describing the resultant tunes, he continues, 'these are catchy melodies. They have everything I look for in a repertoire – a lot of variety, emotional range, humour, hooks. Some of the tunes sounded traditional and some of them were pure imagination-driven gems.'²⁹ With this description, Schroer expresses an explicit interest in creating a fiddle tradition, which he defines not in terms of an identifiable local style but in terms of melodic creativity emerging from within the community. At the same time, he is describing a repertoire and associated musical values that are reflective of his own. Schroer positioned himself, therefore, as a model – the embodiment of the ideals that he hoped would guide the emerging community.

Specifically, Schroer modelled the acquisition of a diverse repertoire: 'there is a really wide scope here, everything from lyrical or whimsical songs to Newfie Jigs, French Canadian, Irish, Breton, cartoon music, hymns, pure fancy'.³⁰ Finally, an aspect of the project that demonstrated a link with Schroer's own narrative-based approach to tune writing was the use of stories as generating tools for composition. Schroer describes this with characteristic wordplay: 'A lot of these tunes were built around stories. We would find a story that was meaningful for the kids and take it from there. Spinning yarns, weaving melodies – it's all cut from the same cloth.'³¹ *Truffles* was not only a lesson in how to produce distinctive music, but it also transmitted an ideal of community music making as a process that involved

free imagination, stylistic diversity and communication of extra musical meaning, through the inclusion of accompanying stories.

Smithers is a CD Schroer compiled as a gift to 59 of his fiddle students in the area. He composed one tune for each of them, kept the project secret, and had it delivered to them for Christmas 2007. He recorded the CD not long after his leukemia diagnosis, and employed one of his most ardent protégés, 18-year-old Smithers native Emilyn Stam, as piano accompanist for the entire CD. *Smithers*, with its individually dedicated tunes, is the bringing together of individualist and communitarian ideals. The CD is at once an acknowledgement of each student's personality and unique attributes, and an affirmation of their membership in the Smithers community. The repertoire on *Smithers* consists predominantly of jigs and waltzes. This is unusual in light of his overall repertoire, and considering the general arc of his career, it marks a re-engagement with traditional forms, and easily transmittable tunes. This strongly contrasts to his albums of solo fiddle tunes that he referred to as 'fractal music', tunes that are composed from small interchangeable motifs. The emphasis on uniqueness in the performance style on *02* (1999) and *Restless Urban Primitive* (2001) means it is unlikely a community will receive the fractal tunes into tradition. The CD *Smithers*, on the other hand, consists largely of tunes written in common dance music forms and represents a contrasting emphasis on inclusiveness and transmission.

Truffles represents the ideal of unfettered creativity and *Smithers* demonstrates how Schroer's engagement with that community inspired his own work. The Twisted String, an ensemble of former fiddle students from Smithers and Roberts Creek, potently represents Schroer's legacy of tunes; the group today is dedicated to performing Schroer's music. Yet it also represents a legacy of performance practice, particularly with the unannounced roving performances that the group calls 'random acts of violins'. During these performances the players dress in clashing, bright colours and the group plays tunes and arrangements that are characterized by syncopation, a pop sensibility, and an emphasis on groove. One particularly symbolic performance was on the Toronto subway during a visit the group made there in the midst of Schroer's illness in February 2008, a moment recorded by a mother of one of the fiddle students and made available for viewing on YouTube.³² One can see in the video that the group is engaged in face-to-face interaction with a public involved in a commonplace, repetitive city activity. These rural and semi-rural fiddlers signify community, spontaneity, and freedom of creative expression in the midst of an alienating activity of urban life, as they enact this playful social commentary.

Conclusion

Twisted String's choice of the Toronto Subway as a performance venue has continuity with Schroer's own career. He developed his technique and repertoire playing in the subway before beginning his life as a touring and recording musician. Whether in this symbolic way, or in other more concrete ways, Schroer modelled a 'way of being' a contemporary fiddler, to communities where there is no dominant inherited,

revived or recontextualized tradition. The 'way of being' transmitted by Oliver to his students involved the importance of individual expression, but it also encompassed the goal of establishing continuity. A similarity between Schroer's approach and that of the Sibelius Academy is in the use of traditional music as a 'point of departure' for individual creativity.³³ According to his student Emilyn Stam, Schroer stressed the importance of learning traditional tunes from a wide variety of repertoires.³⁴ Whether or not styles were engaged with deeply enough for students to become versed in the nuances that make a regional style distinctive is in need of further music analysis, but my impression is that the internalization of melodic structure was more important to Schroer than the learning of regional stylistic elements such as ornamentation and bowing. Ultimately, the goal of learning traditional music was to provide the tools for individual creativity. The tradition being 'born', ideally, was one of a creative process, and a way to engage musically with contemporary culture, as much as a tradition of tunes.

Finally, Schroer's alliance with the British Columbia fiddle students was but one branch in the complex network of musicians with which he worked. In my own experience as a musician on the North American and European folk scenes I have noticed that Schroer is not unique in this regard; many contemporary musicians on the professional folk music circuit utilize such networks to maintain their careers and broaden their creative resources. Case studies concerning the alliances of individual musicians would serve to shine the light on how these musicians negotiate with expectations of genre and stylistic categories, as well as notions of community and continuity, as they pursue often singular creative paths.

Notes

¹ Gay Abbate, 'Fiddler was a Prolific Composer and Performer with a Style All His Own', *Globe and Mail*, 19 July 2008, p. S-12.

² See Oliver Schroer, *O2*, Big Dog Music BD9901, 1999, and Oliver Schroer, *Restless Urban Primitive*, Big Dog Music BD0101, 2001, for examples of his soloistic fiddling style.

³ The collaborators to which I am referring are chromatic button accordionist Maria Kalaniemi (Finland), diatonic button accordionist Filippo Gambetta (Italy), and flute player Nuala Kennedy (Ireland). Schroer recorded with Kalaniemi on his CD *Stewed Tomatoes*, Big Dog Music BD001, 1996, with Gambetta on his CD *A Million Stars*, Big Dog Music BD0401, 2004, and recorded an entire CD with Nuala Kennedy, *Enthralled* (not yet released at time of writing).

⁴ As James Leary noted in his study of Midwestern Polkabilly music, terms such as 'roots', 'traditional', and 'folk' 'all connote long-standing, even mystical relationships between people and places'. James Leary, *Polkabilly: How the Goose Island Ramblers Redefined American Folk Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 4.

⁵ Oliver Schroer, personal communication, October 2007.

⁶ Filippo Gambetta, personal communication, June 2009.

⁷ Beverley Diamond, 'The Music of Modern Indigeneity: From Identity to Alliance Studies', John Blacking Memorial Lecture, presented at the annual meeting for the European Seminar

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in Ethnomusicology, Jokkmokk, Sweden, 6–10 September 2006, www.marta-dahlig.com/esem/pdf/ml/JBML2006-Diamond.pdf [accessed 9 July 2009] (para. 7 of 57).

⁸ Leary, *Polkabilly*, p. 161.

⁹ Leary, *Polkabilly*, p. 4.

¹⁰ Leary, *Polkabilly*, p. 5.

¹¹ See Phil Thomas, *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* (Vancouver: Hancock House, 2007).

¹² Oliver Schroer, personal communication, November 2007.

¹³ Juniper Hill, 'From Ancient to Avant-Garde to Global: Creative Processes and Institutionalization in Finnish Contemporary Folk Music' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2005), p. 339.

¹⁴ See also Tina K. Ramnarine, *Ilmatar's Inspirations: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Changing Soundscape of Finnish Folk Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Ramnarine uses the term 'new folk music' to identify this trend in Finland (p. 5).

¹⁵ Abbate, 'Fiddler was a Prolific Composer', p. S12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Oliver Schroer, *Camino*, Big Dog Records BD 0401, 2006. In 2004 Schroer recorded this CD while walking the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route in Spain.

¹⁸ Oliver Schroer, 'Leukemia', letter to mailing list subscribers www.oliverschroer.com/leukemia.htm [accessed 9 July 2009].

¹⁹ Philip Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. xviii.

²⁰ Emilyn Stam, personal communication, July 2008.

²¹ See Chris Goertzen, *Fiddling for Norway: Revival and Identity* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1997) for one of the most thorough ethnomusicological studies of regional and national fiddle music revival.

²² Coast String Fiddlers, 'About the Coast String Fiddlers' coaststringfiddlers.com/about/ [accessed 9 July 2009].

²³ Valley Youth Fiddlers, 'About Valley Youth Fiddlers' www.vyf.ca/about/ [accessed 9 July 2009].

²⁴ Leslie Jean MacMillan, personal communication, July 2008.

²⁵ Chelsea Sleep, personal communication, June 2008.

²⁶ *Oliver Schroer and Truffles*, Big Dog Records [no matrix number], 2005.

²⁷ Oliver Schroer with Emelyn Stam, *Smithers*, Big Dog Records BD0702, 2007

²⁸ Oliver Schroer, 'Truffles', www.oliverschroer.com/truffles.htm [accessed 9 July 2009].

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Carmen Rosen, 'Random Acts of Violins in the Toronto Subway', YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdHBQ4uQM6E [accessed 10 July 2009].

³³ Hill, 'From Ancient to Avant-Garde to Global', p. 341.

³⁴ Stam, July 2008.