

Texas contest fiddling: moving the focus of contrast and change to inner variations

Chris Goertzen

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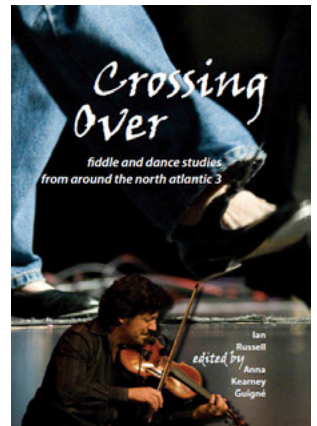
Crossing Over

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 3

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Texas contest fiddling: moving the focus of contrast and change to inner variations

CHRIS GOERTZEN

Texas fiddling, the youngest of widespread North American fiddle styles, is set apart from older styles by the systematic and pervasive practice of melodic variation that made the style especially apt for fiddle contests. In a compelling symbiosis, as fiddle contests became the main public venue for traditional fiddling in the United States, Texas fiddling spread through most of the country, and diversified to a modest extent. Melodic variation remains at the centre of its appeal. In fact, this aspect of the style is so critical that audiences at contests do not mind if they hear the same pieces over and over; the variations make the performances different enough to savour individually.

All good Texas fiddlers know the same couple of dozen tunes well; the central repertoire is surprisingly small in number of tunes, but nevertheless rich in total musical content. Fiddlers agree on roughly how to play the initial presentations of the two main strains of any tune, and they also agree on the main procedures fuelling their shared exuberant and detailed variation technique. In that technique, there is a complicated balance between a nested pair of broad understandings – first, concerning how variation proceeds for all core tunes and second, typical variation behaviour for the specific tune in question – and freedoms taken with those norms to express regional, personal, and spur-of-the-moment takes on any tune. I will focus in this article on one representative performance, ‘Dusty Miller’, as played by Wes Westmoreland III during the 2006 Texas State Fiddle Contest (see overleaf). The reader may wish at this point to play through the transcription that fills the next two pages, or perhaps to listen to multiple performances of the tune on CDs or on the internet. While several tunes in the broader North Atlantic fiddle world bear the title ‘Dusty Miller’, all performances going by that name that I have heard at modern American fiddle contests are of this same tune.

The main two strains, labelled A and B in the transcription, are the original ones, in fact the only ones in the earliest recording of this ‘Dusty Miller’, by a Capt. M. J. Bonner, made in 1925 in Houston for Victor.¹ As in most fiddle tunes most places, Westmoreland’s ‘Dusty Miller’ centres on the tune’s classic two strains whose incipits contrast in range, these two strings referred to by insiders in the North

Atlantic fiddle world variously as ‘high and low’, ‘coarse and fine’, and so forth. Most common Texas tunes have an additional strain (or two or three). In fact, several Texas fiddlers have told me that given breakdowns are their favourites *because* they have ‘lots of parts to them’. ‘Dusty Miller’, which ranks high on all Texas fiddlers’ list of favourites, begins with an A strain that starts quite high, with a first lick entirely on the e string. Because it is especially high, I added an underlined H to its name in the analytical table, so that its successive manifestations are called A1H, A2H, and so on. The complementary B strain is very low, with a first lick on the g string, so that passes through it are labelled B1L, B2L, and so on (thus, the underlining means ‘very’). I called the new, C strain L, or low, although it is in the middle of the fiddle’s first position tessitura in initial range. Lastly, in this and most performances there is another new strain closely allied to that C strain, but positioned an octave up, thus with an added H with an arrow pointing up in the table (C11H↑, C12H↑, etc.).

Just as performances in *older* southern American fiddle styles are made up of alternating strains in pairs, so are these Texas performances in large part, just more strains, and with elaborated notions of symmetry. The form is no longer simply AABBAABBAABB until a real or imagined dance is done. These contest pieces, shaped for the stage, and thus for an attentive audience, outline dramatic arcs. Thus, we hear presentations of strains (in pairs), subsequent paired runs through them that are modified to be bolder and bolder, and finally, in many cases, clear returns to the opening gestures.

I experimented with characterizing prominent gestures in this ‘Dusty Miller’, focusing on how those gestures change when revisited. Since each 8-measure strain consists of two 4-measure phrases, I chose to reduce the signature measures, the first and fifth ones of each strain, to a symbol or so each. Those are what appear in the analytical table (see appendix 1), symbols standing for the beginnings of the two phrases of each strain. I tried to see how *few* symbols would suffice, hoping that assigning these to given melodic gesture types could streamline the process of comparing performances.

The table includes reductions of four performances of ‘Dusty Miller’: the transcribed one from the 2006 Texas State Fiddle Championship played by Wes Westmoreland, another played by him in the same venue two years earlier, one by Jimmie Don Bates, and one by Ricky Turpin. (Reductions of two performances of a very different tune, ‘Sally Johnson’, as played by Turpin and by Westmoreland, appear in appendix 2). All of these performances are from the Texas State Fiddle Contest (formal title: Texas State Championship Fiddlers’ Frolics), from 2002 through to 2006. All three fiddlers are in their forties and have been or are now professional fiddlers/fiddle teachers, all have won this contest several times, and all are enshrined in the Fiddlers’ Frolics Hall of Fame.² All three men play this tune at some point in nearly every contest they enter. I selected the versions to transcribe or analyse based on the quality of my recordings, that is, other versions were ruled out due to crowd noise or other sonic blips obscuring bits of melody. These performance are all solidly representative, in part because these three musicians are eager and careful students

of the history of Texas fiddling, and, in a symmetrical factor, that younger fiddlers avidly model themselves on these champions. In short, all four performances are fully 'in' the tradition.

Within each column on the table, I left some boxes blank in order to get the diagrams of the various performances to line up nicely. That was required because the fiddlers follow approximately the same formal plan for a given tune, but only approximately. I stretched each performance with a few blank boxes to make the parallels as easy to see as possible. For instance, all three fiddlers play the A strain of 'Dusty Miller' twice, then the B strain twice, but only Bates plays the C strain 3 times, so I extended the neighbouring diagrams with an empty box each so that the return to A within three of the performances was lined up horizontally. While the forms of the performances vary, all start with A (twice), and follow that pair with B (twice), then C (at least twice). The path to C↑ varies, but all performances do get there in time, and all revisit strains A, B, and C before finishing.

Now to the individual symbols employed in the table. Strain A1 of Westmoreland's 2006 performance starts syncopated, which I represented with the appropriate note values: ♪ ♩ ♪. When the beginning of the phrase rolls around again in measure 5, the syncopated half-measure yields to an extended conjunct rise in triplets. To mark that substitution, I reached into my computer's modest storehouse of symbols and found a rising arrow (↗). Strain A2 starts with that same triplet run, then the middle of the strain contains a dyad including a note lower than any previously played, a dyad from which the line leaps up in mid-measure to rejoin the contour as played already thrice. To mark that second substitution, I found an elongated S (∫). The bottom of the ∫ represents the low notes starting at measure 13, the body of the ∫ the leap up, then the top portrays the gesture continuing at the same high pitch level as in the three previous phrases. The ∫ and the ↗ thus stand for related gestures. Both are meant to intensify the opening lick by combining an expanded range with *some* new rhythm: the ∫ thins the original rhythm, while the ↗ thickens that rhythm. Both revisions add impetus, one through inserting a small bit of suspense, the other through increasing activity.

The other two main techniques that intensify such measures on their returns are similarly complementary: one thins, one thickens. These two techniques tend to enter a given performance of this and other tunes in the repertoire a little later than the ∫ and ↗ pair. Look in the transcription at the beginning of B2 (versus that place in B1), then check the corresponding spots in the table. I call this moment a stretch or hold, and represent it with a double-ended empty arrow (⇔; a tapeworm segment?) Such gestures can clarify harmony, but that is not their main purpose. They are really about creating suspense, gathering breath before all hell breaks loose again, much like a sprinter settling into the blocks, poised to take off.

The corresponding *dense* gesture is when a measure fills with eighth notes – see B1, measure 5. In the tables, I represent each such moment with two pairs of eighth notes. This happens frequently. It is not arrestingly dramatic, but maintains a high energy level. My other, somewhat less-used symbols match up with gestures

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The image displays a musical score for the piece 'Dusty Miller' in G major (one sharp). The score is written in treble clef and 2/4 time. It consists of 12 staves of music, organized into sections labeled A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2, C1, C2, and A3. Section A1 (staves 1-2) features a melodic line with triplets and a bass line with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Section A2 (staves 3-4) continues the melodic and bass lines. Section B1 (staves 5-6) shows a change in the bass line to a more rhythmic pattern. Section B2 (staves 7-8) continues the B1 bass line. Section C1 (staves 9-10) features a more complex melodic line with slurs and ties. Section C2 (staves 11-12) continues the C1 melodic line. Section A3 (staff 13) concludes the piece with a final melodic phrase and bass accompaniment. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and triplets.

Figure 1 'Dusty Miller', as played by Wes Westmoreland III (Texas, 2006)

GOERTZEN *Texas contest fiddling*

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Texas contest fiddling" by Goertzen. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It consists of ten staves of music. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, such as eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. Several measures are marked with boxed letters and numbers: A4, B3, B4, C3, C4, and A5. There are also triplets indicated by a '3' over a group of notes. The music concludes with a double bar line and a final chord.

that, while far from rare, are not as common as those already described. Converging arrows (\rightrightarrows) mark glissandos, slides many of which are unison-achieving double stops, like right at the beginning of C1, where an open-string \underline{a} is played at the same time as is a glissando from $g^\#$ on the d string up to that \underline{a} , creating a modal node, a common way that fiddlers in the South accent important pitches. That same spot is also a stretch, so I put a stretch arrow *and* a converging arrow in the table; could we call that a squeeze? Another combination symbol marking a special effect is the rising arrow plus paired eighth notes. That stands for what I call that an explosion, a pile of triplet arpeggios featuring rapid string crossings back and forth through all four strings, filling a measure. Bates has one of those in his B1, second half; there are more of these later in his performance and some occur in Turpin's rendition. Lastly, but critically, when a player replicates most or all of an earlier measure – something done sparingly – I represented that with a curled arrow (\cup); all three players did such *rounding* near the ends of their performances.

Westmoreland's 2006 'Dusty Miller' starts with the syncopated figure which leads off most performances of that tune, a motif suggesting that rhythm will be a prominent topic in the performance. This turns out to be true. Remember the rising arrow in measure 5, the replication of that arrow starting A2, the tall S in A2, measure 5. B growls and stretches through 2 strains. C concentrates on the squeeze. Then, we have a rhythmically busy pair of high C strains. The point is to do something familiar, but in third position, a tessitura, where dense rhythms are favoured. Nevertheless, the second half of each of these strains starts with a stretch recalling that beginning B2, and thus offering a bit of closure.

We are now at the halfway point in the performance, with eight strains behind us and eight to go. We return to strain A in incarnation A3, which takes up where we had left off in the second half of A2, that is, featuring a dramatic \int , although commencing with a shorter note value. The second half covers about the same tessitura, but now broken into eighth notes. Strain A4 then begins with the \nearrow found in the middle of A1 and the beginning of A2, followed by a second half starting with continuous eighth notes, exactly as in A3. In A3 and A4, the performer seems to be consolidating earlier gestures, but at the same time seeking out a somewhat busier total effect than seen in A1 and A2. The same combination of reminding and slightly intensifying holds in the next two strains: essentially the same gesture opens B3 as had B1, but it is now just a little denser rhythmically, and the same comparison holds for the beginning measures of B4 and B2. At this point in the first half of the performance, we heard strain C twice, and then strain C \uparrow twice. Now, in the second half, the formal device of recalling but intensifying at the same time is performed ruthlessly, by simply omitting the C strain, and letting the much more vivid C \uparrow stand for both. But was this enough of the C strain?

More often than not, performances in this style end with a run or two through the A strain, with some sort of systematic rounding taking place through both the general factor of returning to the opening strain and also precisely how the return to A is shaped. This happens in three of the four performances of 'Dusty

Miller' represented. In Westmoreland's 2006 performance, A5 reaffirms the striking importance of the gesture \int in this version of the tune by starting by aping A3, then taking an even bigger leap to begin the second half of the strain. Something remarkable happens in A6. As in A4, Westmoreland begin with the gesture \nearrow . But the second half is both rounding and a considerable surprise: he ends with the gesture that started both C11 and C12. Just before A returned for this final pair of strains, we had been left with a truncated C section, expecting more of some kind of C strain, and here it is. The entire effect of A6 – quite a grand effect – is that A6 takes the listener back to A, but also encapsulates the entire progress of the performance.

I have about a dozen recordings of Wes Westmoreland playing this tune at this same contest from 2001 through to 2008 (a fiddler may play a given tune only once at this contest during a given year, but Wes and several other expert and generous fiddlers often play hits like this during the guitar accompaniment competition bracket, that is, they play the tune while the guitarist backing them is judged). All of these performances are somewhat similar, but no more so than the 2006 and 2004 versions (the latter diagrammed next to the 2006 version in this article, and transcribed elsewhere).³ Westmoreland's 2004 performance emphasizes the gesture \nearrow a little less from the start, and retains the opening syncopated gesture quite a bit more than in the 2006 version. Strain A returns before we ever hear the C1 strain, and there is comparatively more emphasis on C than on C1, and more emphasis on the A strain overall, with symmetries and cumulative rounding concentrated in A6. The 2004 version is no less compelling than the one he played in 2006; it is just a moderately different exploration of the possibilities of the tune.

These are two very tight, logical, and dramatic forms of a fine tune. How do Westmoreland's versions relate to the thousands of other performances of 'Dusty Miller'? In terms of big regional divisions in Texas-derived contest styles, I will briefly mention the two main style offshoots, one in the Tennessee Valley and the other in the Northwest USA. Some of the champions in the Tennessee Valley, such as Daniel Carwile and Sharon Bounds, play breakdowns in general and 'Dusty Miller' in particular, much as do our three Texans. But their waltzes are more lyrical, and they play less swing; that is where the regional style difference lies. But other prominent fiddlers in the Tennessee Valley, like Joel Whittinghill and Roy Crawford, show various bluegrass influences in a substantial fraction of their breakdown performances.

In the Northwest, the sphere of influence of the giant annual contest in Weiser, Idaho, most 'Dusty Millers' are less detailed in form, and fiddlers show comparatively little interest in rhythmic bite and rhythm-punctuated shaping of form. The main factor to consider is how the typical contest format has influenced style. At the contest in Weiser and in satellite contests, fiddlers are required to fit three tunes into four minutes. That leaves very little time for melodic variation, and, in such a compressed space, less inclination to do anything dramatic. At the same time, more players here than in Texas have some classical violin training. The overall effect is that contest performances in Weiser and its sphere of influence are shorter

and, in a literal way, *sweeter*: that is, a relatively strong bridge to the classical violin world is marked through timbre (less presence of the aggressive-sounding higher upper partials), through patterns of intonation that are closer to those characteristic of art music, and in general technical fluency.

Last, I will return to Texas and to the personal level, to contrasting the versions of 'Dusty Miller' played by our three Texans. An outsider who heard the four performances shown in the diagrams would immediately notice the many commonalities; lots of fiddlers in other styles and plenty of audience members (and academics) attuned to those older styles say that 'contest fiddling is all alike'. But this dismissal is a common symptom of simple lack of familiarity. Every fiddle style with which I have analysed clearly constitutes an intimate world, one relatively opaque to outsiders but filled with variety for aficionados. Certainly, Texas audiences find these players to be very, very different. Jimmie Don Bates gets away with taking the most chances formally and with rhythmic variety, as you see in the chart, and with especially aggressive and percussive accents (an aspect I did not transcribe or show in a diagram). The casual measured brutality of his fiddling is real in-your-face music. Ricky Turpin is as subtle and suave as any Texas fiddler could aspire to be. It is clear in Appendix 1 how often a symbol follows itself or alternates with another: he is exploring subtle changes within repeating broad structures, changes smaller than the table picks up. Wes balances testosterone and elegance, and has especially systematic long-range plans within his performances, like the gradual departures and clean closure seen in both diagrammed versions of his versions of 'Dusty Miller'. At the contest in Weiser, one attempt to judge fairly is to have the judges unable to *see* the contestants, who thus are purportedly anonymous. Whether or not that really works in the cases of the best players in Weiser, such an attempt at even-handedness-through-anonymity could not be claimed to serve that purpose in Texas. All of the judges are themselves former or current champions, and they can easily identify other top Texas fiddlers' playing within twenty or thirty seconds.

How broadly useful might such a system of analysis be? I 'road-tested' the system by trying it out on samples of other common Texas tunes, including 'Sally Goodin', 'Sally Johnson', 'Leather Britches', 'Billy in the Low Ground', and others. The system worked without significant modification for some. It did not help at all with 'Sally Goodin', which builds power during performance through carefully paced mostly incremental but occasionally more abrupt changes. This is oddly similar to a *hardingfele* variation technique.⁴ A few of the more typically-behaving Texas tunes responded less well than 'Dusty Miller' to this rhythm-oriented set of symbols. Those were tunes that are more evenly dense, whose identity has presented in initial strains and explored thereafter in performance, focuses less on rhythm than on details of contour. For instance, the pair of reductions of 'Sally Johnson' given in the final table (ppendix 2) suggests that that tune might not be as interesting as 'Dusty Miller'. That simply is not so. If I had begun my search for a method with which to analyze melodic variation in Texas fiddling with 'Sally Johnson', a tune nearly as common, and about as old as 'Dusty Miller', I probably would have assembled

a differently-focused set of symbols. Each tune has its own mood and favoured procedures, often suggested by *something* in the older two strains, but worked out most thoroughly during the course of variation. It is easy to think of Texas fiddling as a specialized corner of jazz, but the behaviour of the common tunes also invites comparison with the Indian raga or Middle Eastern maqam systems: the signature Texas fiddle tunes have melodies that generate small acoustic and emotive worlds, worlds that are similar but never identical.

This seems so far so good. But why do the two versions of ‘Sally Johnson’ diagrammed in that final table look more different from each other than do any pairs among the diagrammed versions of ‘Dusty Miller’? I also studied (but did not transcribe for this article) a performance of ‘Sally Johnson’ by Bates. It was about as similar to Turpin’s version as one might expect after studying the various ‘Dusty Millers’. Actually, Wes Westmoreland’s version of ‘Sally Johnson’ is the odd one. It starts with what is now usually the B strain, and omits a customary strain, the high A strain appearing in the middle of Turpin’s performance and of most modern performances. That is the key: the word ‘modern’. It turns out that Westmoreland, who has an especially strong sense of history, is paralleling – not copying, but paying a detailed homage to – seminal Texas fiddler Eck Robertson’s recording of ‘Sally Johnson’ from 1922 (the same year Eck recorded his famous, amazingly rich ‘Sally Goodin’).⁵ In nearly a century since then, ‘Sally Goodin’ has not changed much as it has passed through hundreds of other fiddlers’ hands, but Eck’s other tunes have, as Texas fiddling has built substantially on the variation technique pioneered early in the twentieth century. If you know Wes Westmoreland’s ‘Dusty Miller’, you have got a fair notion of how modern Texas fiddle variation technique works, but if you compare it with his deliberately antiquated ‘Sally Johnson’, then you also have a sense of change in this style, change focused in the variation technique, change whose next fruits we can eagerly anticipate.

Appendix 2 How phrases start (and are modified) in performances of ‘Sally Johnson’

Turpin		Westmoreland	
		B1L	♪ ♪, ♪ ♪
		B2L	♪ ♪, ⇔
A1H	♪ ♪, ♪ ♪	A1H	♪, ♪ ♪
A2H	♪, ♪ ♪	A2H	♪, ⇔
B1L	♪ ♪, ♪	B3L	♪ ♪, ♪ ♪
B2L	⇔, ♪ ♪	B4L	♪, ♪ ♪
A3H	♪, ♪ ♪		
A4H	♪, ♪ ♪		
B3L	⇔, ♪ ♪	B5L	⇔, ♪ ♪
B4L	⇔, ♪ ♪	B6L	⇔, ♪ ♪
A↑1H↑	⇔, ♪ ♪		
A↑2H↑	♪ ♪, ⇔		
C1L	⇔, ♪ ♪	C1L	⇔, ♪
C2L	⇔, ♪ ♪	C2L	⇔, ♪
B5L	♪ ♪, ♪	B7L	↗, ♪ ♪
		B8L	⇔, ♪ ♪
A6H	♪, ♪ ♪	A3H	♪ ♪ ♪, ♪ ♪
A7H	♪, ♪ ♪	A4H	♪ ♪, ♪ ♪
		A5H	♪ ♪, ♪ ♪
B6L	⇔, ♪ ♪		

Notes

¹ Victor 19699; the fiddler’s full name was Moses J. Bonner. My thanks to Paul Wells for a copy of this recording.

² For more biographical details, search ‘Fiddlers’ Frolics Hall of Fame’ online and click on the appropriate photographs, fiddlersfrolics.org/HOF/index.htm [accessed 20 May 2009]. Sound files are attached to most Hall of Fame inductees’ web pages at the official site, though none of these recordings are of ‘Dusty Miller’.

³ Chris Goertzen, *Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), pp. 104-05.

⁴ Melodic variation technique on the *hardingfele* (often anglicized as ‘Hardanger fiddle’) does not present a tidy picture, in part due to differences in how it works in different regions of western Norway. The most detailed exploration of this published in English is in Pandora Hopkins, *Aural Thinking in Norway* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1986). See also transcription of a *hardingfele* in Chris Goertzen, *Fiddling for Norway: Revival and Identity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 289–91.

⁵ See Eck Robertson, ‘Sally Gooden’, *Internet Archive*, www.archive.org/details/Sallygooden [accessed 20 May 2009].