

Fiddlers, dancing, art and utility: what isn't traditional?

Neil V. Rosenberg

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Ón gCos go Cluas

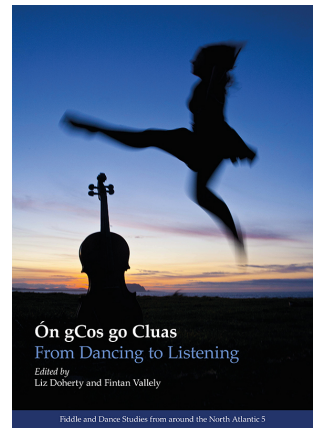
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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About the author:

Neil V. Rosenberg is a leading figure in Folklore studies and in Bluegrass music circles. A native of the western United States (Olympia, Washington; Los Alamos, New Mexico; Berkeley, California) who has been a performing musician (violin, voice, guitar, mandolin, and five-string banjo) since childhood, his music skills and experiences have helped him gain a closer understanding of music and music performance. This led to a PhD in Folklore from Indiana University in 1970, and to his teaching from 1968 until 2004 in the Department of Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland where he specialised in the study of contemporary folk music traditions. There he investigated the ways in which popular music interacts with local and regional folk music traditions and examined processes of cultural revival. His research – in Canada and the United States – focused upon professional, semiprofessional and amateur old-time, bluegrass, country and folk musicians. Now Professor Emeritus of Folklore at Memorial, Rosenberg's highly regarded writing includes *Bluegrass: A History* (1985, the definitive work on that form of music, reprinted with a new preface in 2005). His other well-known publication has been the editing of the influential essay collection *Transforming Tradition* (1993), a unique examination of folk music revivals. Other works are *Bluegrass Odyssey: A Documentary in Pictures and Words* (2001), co-authored with photographer Carl Fleischhauer; and *The Music of Bill Monroe* (2007), a bio-discography co-authored with Charles Wolfe; he has published more than sixty articles and review essays. Formerly Recorded Sound Reviews Editor of the *Journal of American Folklore*, he has

edited and annotated many recordings, including a contribution to the brochure for the Smithsonian/Folkways reissue of Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music for which he won a 1997 Grammy Award. A Fellow of the American Folklore Society, Rosenberg is a recipient of the Marius Barbeau Medal for lifetime achievement from the Folklore Studies Association of Canada.

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Fiddlers, dancing, art and utility: what isn't traditional?

NEIL V. ROSENBERG

My thinking on the topic of the intersection of fiddle music and dance is shaped by ideas about art and utility which for me also affects how I view 'tradition'. In discussing these terms I speak mainly from the perspective of my research in Canada's Maritime Provinces, particularly New Brunswick. Since I believe that ethnographic scholarship, built on the principle of participant observation, rests upon a foundation of self-knowledge, I open each section with personal history. I begin with fiddlers.

Fiddlers

I started on classical violin lessons at the age of seven, my first recital coming a year later. But it was not until I was ten that I got my first aurally-learned tune, 'The Irish Washerwoman', from a fellow violinist in the community symphony; I thought of it as a melody, not a fiddle tune. At that time and place (post-war, American western middle-class), fiddling was stigmatised, and I knew virtually nothing about it. In 1954 as a teen, I abandoned violin and the school orchestra to play 'folk music' on the guitar with my peers, and then in college I discovered bluegrass in which I played banjo. Fiddling is an important component in bluegrass,¹ but even so, it took me several years to get beyond the stigma to appreciate and understand it. By then I had embarked on a career studying and teaching folklore, and in 1961 I moved to the Folklore Institute of Indiana University for graduate studies. Its founder, folktale scholar Stith Thompson, had been inspired by European folklorists, and the *Handbook of Irish Folklore* was an important text for us.

In Indiana I pursued parallel apprenticeships in the academic and music businesses.² When I wasn't studying, I played bluegrass and old time music with good fiddlers and other musicians in a variety of contexts including shows, jam sessions, dances, recordings and broadcasts.³ During my years as an apprentice folklorist, there was a broadening of interest in the discipline from the study of the forms of folklore to a search for its definitions – a search dominated by the idea of performance. By the 1970s folklore was being defined as 'artistic communication in small groups'.⁴ Today, when they talk about what in an earlier time would have been called 'Folklore', folklorists often call it 'expressive culture' or

‘intangible cultural heritage’. Starting in 1967, I began meeting younger folklorists who were fiddlers studying fiddling: Alan Jabbour, Richard Blaustein, and Miles Krassen. By 1968, the year I left Indiana, I had begun my own research on fiddling: buying records, learning fiddle tunes,⁵ and interviewing musicians.

At the core of my research was bi-musicality, what Burt Feintuch defines as ‘the learning of musical performance practices from traditions other than the scholar’s native music’.⁶ I quickly discovered that ‘bi-musical’ was also ‘bi-cultural’; I later described my studies as ‘a mixture of going native and doing research’, which to me resembles the immigrant experience.⁷ It is significant that Feintuch mentions ‘traditions’, for while folklorists redefined the name and definition of their discipline, they still retained the word ‘traditions’ to describe the things communicated or expressed. Like any widely used term, this means many things to many people. Viewing it broadly, Henry Glassie suggests that tradition is ‘the creation of the future out of the past’, tied both to history as ‘a process of cultural construction’ and to culture as ‘old ideas newly enacted’.⁸ ‘Tradition’, he adds, ‘is the means for deriving the future from the past ... History, culture and the human actor meet in tradition’.⁹ I learned about tradition in the music business as a witness and participant, and by hearing about it in interviews and conversations, all preserved on tapes and in detailed field notes written soon after the events. Much of what I heard consisted of stories people told about their own lives – what folklorists call ‘personal experience narratives’.¹⁰ The narratives I heard from and about musicians conveyed what I call their *persona*. These musicians and those in their community told stories that shaped and affirmed their roles as actors, like the ‘doers, knowers, and marketers’¹¹ participating in NAFCo 2012, as described by Ronström in 2008. Studying their discourse reaffirmed the impressions I gained as a scholar-performer committed to bi-musicality. I concluded that music performances always have *transactional* value – they are not only art but also have utility. This is why I speak of the music business. If you are a musician playing your music, and anyone else is there with you, then *ipso facto* you are participating in a music business *transaction* (this I will explain, in due course, using examples from my work as a folklorist and ethnomusicologist).

In 1968 I came to Memorial (Newfoundland’s provincial university), hired to organise an archive and teach courses in the Department of Folklore. I quickly learned that, in Newfoundland, the accordion was a very popular instrument, which often played dance music associated elsewhere with fiddles. Indeed, local dialect identified ‘the fiddler’ simply as a person who plays for dances.¹² Whatever instrument performed it,¹³ this local old-time music consisted of differing forms and repertoires that overlapped with each other and with what I already knew from elsewhere: local, national and international repertoires mixed together uniquely in each community.

Major papers for my folklore courses required fieldwork, and here I learned from my students about the region’s music business. In 1971, one such paper came from a student who borrowed a tape recorder from our archive and taped his wife’s uncle, a fiddler named Emile Benoit. The paper got a good grade and I really liked the recordings, which the student deposited in our archive. With his permission I sent a sampling of them to Mike Seeger, a friend who was working to find suitable performers for Mariposa, Canada’s largest and oldest folk festival. As he was one of the New Lost City Ramblers, I knew that he was

deeply interested in old-time music. My covering letter described Benoit's cultural milieu and praised his broad repertoire and vigorous style. Seeger wrote back: 'Mariposa is more in need of combination singer-musicians from the French community and will probably lean towards Quebec because of the expense'.¹⁴ Today, Emile (who died in 1992) is, along with Rufus Guinard, one of the pillars of contemporary Newfoundland fiddling repertoire and style. But that didn't begin to happen until later in the 1970s.¹⁵

From a music business point of view, I see in this experience three transactions: (1) Emile performed music for his niece's husband to help him with his term paper; (2) the husband used the taped performances to help pass my course; and (3) I used some of his recordings in an unsuccessful attempt to represent Newfoundland culture through its music, and Memorial's study of this, at a national venue. All three followed transactional patterns familiar to me from the music business: collection, academic promotion, and cultural representation. Experiences like this convinced me I needed to learn more about the folk music business elsewhere in Canada, so in 1972 I began field research in New Brunswick.¹⁶

From this point on in this paper I will be drawing from the field notes, tape tables of contents, and tape transcriptions associated with this research, a large body of written data that I now revisit after decades of neglect. It includes eight loose-leaf binders (which I have indexed) and a banker box of files. These documents were created because I sought to learn more about the relationship between folk music (what I now prefer to call vernacular music)¹⁷ and country music, the dominant contemporary popular music of the rural Maritimes in the 1970s. I have already published a number of articles about this research along the folklore-popular culture continuum, but as of yet only a few have focused on fiddling. These have looked at the career of Don Messer, not only the most influential Canadian fiddler of his generation but also a pre-eminent figure in the country's popular music. Messer, who died in 1973 at the age of 64, had been broadcasting and recording since the 1930s. By the 1960s his weekly television show, *Don Messer's Jubilee*, was one of Canada's most-watched programmes, surpassed only by *Hockey Night in Canada*. He and his cast toured nationally for decades. In the summer of 1972 I attended a show by Messer and his band at the Woodstock, New Brunswick annual community festival, Old Home Week. Held in an arena, the show featured old-time fiddling and sentimental country songs,¹⁸ and it was followed by a fiddle contest. Then the floor was cleared and Messer's band played for ballroom dancing.

Afterwards I spoke with the contest winner, Mac Brogan, from the town of Chipman. That fall I began my research with a survey of printed and recorded sources, and in the summer of 1973 I conducted a field survey, visiting and interviewing Brogan, retired country star Kidd Baker, country DJ Charlie Russell, and Earl Mitton, a fiddler who'd made records, done broadcasts, and played dances. In September 1974 I moved to Pleasant Villa, a small village in New Brunswick's Saint John River valley, to start a sabbatical year doing fieldwork in the region. I wasn't totally focused on fiddlers, but fiddling was an important part of the local vernacular and popular music. I met many fiddlers and heard stories about others. One I kept hearing about and whose music I eventually heard via recordings, but whom I never met, was Eloi Leblanc, an Acadian from College Bridge, a small town near Moncton. Everyone who spoke of him began by saying he was 'a great old-time fiddler'. His career as a public performer began on Moncton radio with the Bunkhouse Boys. He then

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went to play with the Maritime Farmers on a Saint John radio show heard throughout the region. Finally, he ended up in the band of country singer Ranceford ‘Kidd’ Baker. Based in Woodstock, and later in a suburb of Toronto, Ontario, Baker’s show toured all over Canada and down into thirty-eight of the United States; he was also on national radio and made records.¹⁹

When Leblanc worked for Baker, he was known only as ‘Fiddling Cy’, and old-time musicians went to Kidd Baker shows just to see and hear him.²⁰ Vic Mullen, who worked in Baker’s band on his last tour in 1958 told me about Leblanc’s music:

He was a solo fiddle player, he didn’t play much background, he played good waltzes and he played great breakdown and hornpipes and that sort of thing in a little different style from the average fiddle player around. Had his own thing, it was sort of a French lilt to it but it was not the staccato stuff. Very true. Light and smooth.²¹

Fiddling Cy never spoke as such on stage, but he did do comedy. He wore a black tuxedo and a bowler hat. Mullen described a popular routine:

He did an imitation of an old-time spring wound gramophone where he would start on the low register and play, I think he played ‘Money Musk’ or one of those tunes that are kind of repetitious in one section and he’d start it low and Kidd would wind him up, and he kept going faster and higher, and no way could you believe that it wasn’t a real phonograph if you weren’t watching. You know – if you could hear it and not see it. And then he’d run down and Kidd would get behind him and wind him up again and it was a simple little act but he had it so good, so neat on the fiddle that it was really interesting and really catchy.²²

Baker also told me of other pantomime comedy routines,²³ but the musicians who spoke to me about Cy (known as Eloi to friends and bandmates) didn’t mention this: it was his fiddling that stuck in their memory. After Baker retired in the late fifties, Eloi Leblanc returned home to College Bridge where he lived the rest of his life with his sister. He became a noted exemplar of Acadian fiddling, often playing for cultural functions at the Université de Moncton. A record company formed by some producers from the local Radio Canada (CBC) station issued an album in 1977, and today field recordings of him made in the 1970s and housed at the Université de Moncton’s Centre d’Etudes Acadiennes Anselme Chiasson can be heard and downloaded at the website of La Famille Léger, an Acadian family band based in Seattle, Washington.²⁴ Eloi Leblanc created a career with his gift as a fiddler. The various transactions he engaged in were valued for differing qualities as his persona shifted from Cy to Eloi: art, entertainment, and cultural representation. One type of transaction – the cultural events at the university – led to other transactions: recordings.

Every fiddler I knew about in this region was thus involved in the music business, somehow. They played at contests, country shows, dances, parties, benefits, political rallies, jam sessions, recording sessions and so forth. Many knew each other, as they were part of a network of specialists and enthusiasts, each with their own persona. Each had personal experience narratives about transactions that helped them explain and define themselves.

Contest fiddler Mac Brogan repeatedly told me how he'd beaten Canadian fiddle champion Johnny Mooring at a contest in Mooring's home town of Springhill, Nova Scotia; the reason given was that the judges were sequestered, and the fiddlers' names weren't announced, just numbers, so that personal identities couldn't affect the decision. When Mac told this story in the mid-seventies, Mooring, who had recently been murdered by a jealous husband, was a much talked about figure.²⁵ Mac artfully attached a personal experience narrative about his successful fiddle transaction to a fresh tabloid murder story. I now turn to dance.

Dancing

When I began learning classical violin, my brother started tap dancing lessons; he practiced to a record. At the age of ten I was introduced to square dancing in my fifth-grade school class; this we did in the gym to recorded music. My parents enjoyed ballroom-style dancing, which they did mainly at parties and clubs, and I, as a teenager, experienced a ballroom dance cotillion which was part of school-related dance lessons. For those, our instructor provided live music in the form of a small combo fronted by horns and piano.²⁶ I also attended socials held by a local modern dance teacher, in which folk dances, to live piano accompaniment, were prominent. Folk dancing was popular at my college, but never to live fiddle or accordion music.²⁷

Dancing and fiddling were indeed not connected in my experience until I was an adult in Indiana, where I began meeting fiddlers who played for square dances. I played a few times at two different dances in neighbouring Brown County: one in the local state park lodge, the other at a country music park's barn. The former was for tourists, the latter for locals, and both featured square dances. At the state park there was a caller, but at the country music park barn each set ran its own figures, and there were also couples dances to contemporary country music. Here surreptitious drinking by the men in the parking lot sometimes led to fights and the sheriff would be called. In interviews, older Brown County fiddlers told me that in the early years of the century before these parks existed, people square-danced in their houses, similar to dance events I had heard of while studying folk-country connections in the Maritimes: the Doane Brothers from Shelburne County on Nova Scotia's South Shore told of growing up at such house dances.²⁸ Many young men knew a few fiddle tunes so they could 'spell' each other, and so no-one at the dance had to play all night. Mac Doane met Don Messer at such a dance and eventually he and his brothers worked in Messer's band, the New Brunswick Lumberjacks.²⁹ They played dances at rural halls in the Saint John River Valley, Saturday night events which were still being held (and at some of the same halls, and with some of the same dances) when I was in Pleasant Villa thirty-five years later. Community dances were important events in Pleasant Villa. Just down the road from us was the Queenstown Orange Hall in which, during our year there, the Orange Society held dances and an annual picnic (the only 'Orange' events that I heard about during my stay). But the hall was also rented out from time to time and early in the winter after I moved in, some Queenstown women organized an Athletic Association benefit dance, for which they hired two local musicians, an accordionist and a guitarist, who in turn recruited me to play with them.

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The rehearsals that ensued were mostly excuses for musical partying. Our leader, the accordionist, was reluctant to become known in the community as a dependable dance musician, as he didn't want to be bothered to provide music this way all of the time, preferring to play as he pleased at parties. My experience with this first dance event taught me the social politics – transactions, if you will – behind these events.³⁰ A few months later another dance musician, African-Canadian singer and tenor banjoist George Hector, was hired to play for a 4H Club³¹ benefit at the same Hall. Hector, whose performances with The Maritime Farmers had made him regionally famous, brought along a good fiddler and a guitarist, and I was asked to sit in on banjo. Entire families – men, women, and children – came to dances at the Queenstown Orange Hall, food and non-alcoholic drinks were sold and served, and between dances the men went out to their cars for a drink, just as they did at the barn dance in Indiana.³²

What kind of dancing took place? Mostly, couples danced to country music. Some older pop standards like 'In the Mood' were expected, as was a rock and roll piece or two at the end of the evening. There was a mixer, 'The Paul Jones', in which men and women formed separate lines and then danced in two big counter-rotating circles. When the music stopped, single men and women partnered with whomever they were next to for a couples dance.³³ This was done five times, and for the band, it meant playing a new tune for each segment. There were also square dances which everyone knew like 'The Quadrille' and 'The Grand March and Circle', for which no caller was needed. These, like similar ones in Newfoundland, had five parts and were done to familiar fiddle tunes like 'Wagoner', 'Year of Jubilo', and 'The Irish Washerwoman'.³⁴ Sitting in at the 4H benefit led to my recruitment by Hector to play banjo and guitar with him at several Canadian Legion halls downriver. The repertoire was similar, but because there was a bar, no families were present and the atmosphere was different. I encountered other kinds of dancing too. One man told me about his square dance club (hobbyists who met weekly during the winter, dancing to records with a live caller). He spoke of attending square dance festivals across the border in Maine where there was good live music by some former country stars and a well-known caller.³⁵

In contrast to this formal activity, I also witnessed dancing at parties, like the anniversary celebration of an Acadian woodsman at his 'camp'³⁶ near Chipman. I noted that as we played, 'there was a lot of dancing – step dancing to the fast stuff and waltzing or fox trots to the slow stuff'.³⁷ One dance I attended at a veterans' club in Fredericton, the provincial capital, provided live music (mainly contemporary country music songs) for couples dancing; there was a bar, the patrons were young and middle-aged, and most of the men were veterans. Step dancing not only took place at parties, it was also institutionalised in combination with fiddle music at contests and at the big provincial folksong festival in Miramichi.

Studying dancing in this way (as a participant observer using bi-musicality as a technique) was a challenge. For, while I interviewed dance musicians, made field notes about dance, and recorded dances, the actual provision of music for dancers distanced me. Instrument, sound system and stage were markers of difference. While our music was shaped for them, and their expectations and requests affected our music performances, we acted and were treated as specialists. For most people, dancing was a pleasant musical contact sport

which, like most amateur sports, was taken seriously, and regulars at the Orange Hall dances could offer pointed critiques of a band if it hindered their dancing pleasure.³⁸ But some, like the square dance club and step-dancers at contests and festivals, practiced it somewhat more consciously as a staged art.

The music for dancing could come from either recordings or live musicians, and those who ran and called dances were key figures: the connections between fiddling and dancing went from strong to weak depending upon a variety of such factors. The fact that fiddlers generally knew about dances and had opinions about the connections between the arts of dancing and fiddling leads me now to consideration of *Art*.

Art

I was raised on art museums, the literary arts, and art music concerts. I believed the arts existed for their own sake. Frames, stages, recordings, and print: all separated the work of art from its creator. This modernist perspective was reinforced in college. The 'new critics' who taught in the fifties focused on works of literature in this way and so did those writing about abstract painting.

In contrast, my experience with music taught me about the art creator's perspective. When I started playing folk music, my parents began calling upon me to perform for 'the company' at cocktail parties. Records were made; concerts and radio followed. My role as a performer required me to have a personal repertoire and style. In emulating favourites, I unconsciously learned creative skills like arranging and musical execution. Knowing about music in this way – from within – made me aware that each performance is a work of art in which skill, training, inspiration, and practice all play a part. It was easy for me to understand and agree with the redefinition of folklore as 'artistic communication in small groups', for in studying storytellers I noticed many similarities between the performance skills they needed and those in the music business. By the time I began fieldwork in the Maritimes³⁹ I was viewing my work as an exercise in bi-musicality that included studying art-criticism within vernacular music systems. Issues of art were rarely spoken about directly, but my experience with one New Brunswick fiddler in which this did happen was instructive. In 1974 Mac Brogan told me about Oscar Egers, a Chipman construction worker who was the son of a famous fiddler from 'the Ridge', a nearby rural neighbourhood. Everyone knew Oscar was passionately involved in fiddling – that was his persona. Mac told me: 'He knows his dad's old tunes, but plays a variety of other stuff and is particularly good on waltzes'.⁴⁰ We met at a fiddle contest: I was a judge, Oscar a contestant.⁴¹

Oscar had grown up listening to his dad at home and Don Messer on the radio. He hung out with other young men who played the fiddle, like Gerry Robichaud who later moved to New England and made records. Oscar was 'in his element' at parties. He made it his mission to find out peoples' musical talents and to make them feel comfortable about performing in front of others at parties. One regular at these jam sessions with small audiences was Dave, a neighbour who played the guitar and sang well.⁴² Since Oscar also performed in more formal settings such as weddings, political rallies and dances, his repertoire also included the latest popular country favourites as well as older music from various sources.

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All of which Dave was able to play too, but was nervous about performing in public, so he rarely joined Oscar then.

My Maritime informants didn't spend a lot of time playing records when I was around. But Oscar did have a collection of recordings by fiddlers he admired, and could proudly show me the first album of Gerry Robichaud, his old friend who'd made good in the States. He also had several albums by Sean McGuire, the influential Irish fiddler who brought techniques and ideas of classical violin to Irish fiddle music somewhat in the same way as Don Messer did for Canadian fiddle music.⁴³ But Oscar's greatest enthusiasm was for Cape Breton style fiddling, the style of which he loved but which he didn't play himself. He claimed he couldn't master the right hand wrist work needed for inserting the essential 'snap' to the notes. He prized too his records of Winston 'Scotty' Fitzgerald, Cape Breton's most widely recorded and broadcasted performer in the fifties and sixties,⁴⁴ and who had local connections in that his guitarist, Estwood Davidson, was from Chipman.⁴⁵ Oscar had a story he liked to tell about meeting Fitzgerald, which I heard in the following circumstances. Oscar called me unexpectedly one cold winter Sunday evening. He and Dave were in Upper Hampstead, just a few miles down the river road from Pleasant Villa, with Doug, a regular listener at his parties. They were visiting Doug's father-in-law, a prosperous farmer. He asked me to bring my banjo along and join them, as they were 'on a little tear' or maybe 'a toot' (cutting loose after a stressful Saturday night). When I arrived at the farmhouse, Oscar told me they'd been invited to provide music the previous day at a housewarming where, from the beginning, the room in which they were playing was filled with women 'howdying' loudly back and forth across the space, catching up on the news. Then, as they continued to play, someone turned on the stereo, a massive eight-speaker affair. In addition to the people at the housewarming who liked old time music, there was also 'a hard rock crowd', and '*they'd* decided to listen to *their* stuff' too. It had been a frustrating evening, Oscar saying it reminded him of the time Winston 'Scotty' Fitzgerald had come to visit him.⁴⁶ Fitzgerald and Estwood Davidson were visiting Chipman, and Oscar had been talking about this at work, having arranged to invite Fitzgerald over to his house for the evening. He was very happy when Fitzgerald and the Davidsons arrived: 'I was in my glory', he said, proud to be visited by this famous fiddler – 'violinist, really', he added – and it had been quite an occasion. Unfortunately, a fellow worker who'd arrived 'loaded drunk' spoiled it. He barged up to Fitzgerald and said: 'I hear you're quite a fiddler, dear, give us "The Mockingbird"'. Oscar repeated this for emphasis, as the tune (actually 'Listen to The Mockingbird') is a nineteenth-century programmatic showpiece that Oscar and many other fiddlers considered hackneyed and overplayed and, compared to the complex and demanding Cape Breton fiddle music, was boring and banal. Then the drunk tried to sit in Fitzgerald's lap, causing such a row that the visitors had to leave. Oscar mimicked the voice of Estwood Davidson's sister-in-law while going out the door as she commented on the drunken buffoon: 'Didn't he know there was high-class people here?' at which everyone had laughed. Oscar's stories constituted a parable about art, told during an evening of music-making that ended with one of the guests opening negotiations to hire us for the St. Patrick's Day dance at a nearby Legion.⁴⁷ In linking the previous night's frustration with people who didn't appreciate his music to his experience with high-class artist Fitzgerald, he sent a message via personal experience narratives to

his hosts about his persona. These were his expectations for audience behaviour toward his music that night and, by extension, the future. This brings me to utility.

Utility

'Utility', like 'transaction' and 'value', is a word often associated with economic theories. But the usefulness of art extends beyond the bottom line. Social and emotional values that cannot be quantified play significant roles here. Oscar was willing to share his art to help others – to make it useful – but only under certain conditions. His pleasure in the art of music came when he was playing at jam sessions with a small attentive audience. He actively worked to place himself in these situations, and that required transactions. That was the heart of his business: it was there that he made his music useful to himself and to others. Music is particularly useful for dancers. When I began playing for square dances in Indiana I found it fun to really get into a tune, but eventually the excitement would run out and it became more work than play. Still, the exercise built muscles that were useful in other contexts.⁴⁸ The transactions had utility for me in the realms of learning and practice in addition to the utility of my music-making for the dancers. Music transactions can have unexpected utility. In my first interview with Mac Brogan, he connected contests to dances, telling me about the judging at an important Nova Scotia fiddle contest where each player was required to:

play a jig and a reel and a waltz. And you're judged, in Amherst now, you're judged like, so much on each one. And I've seen real good women fiddlers over there. But they couldn't play a good waltz
[N: Hmm. I wonder why?]

I don't know, they just [he searched for words] all they ever done was play old time music, like, I guess, never played for dances or anything, but that's what helped me.⁴⁹

Don Messer recognised and utilised this fact. He played dances throughout his career, recorded fiddle tunes with dance calls, and used 'dance' in the titles of his fiddle tune books and record albums. His television show included a four couple dance troupe, the Buchta Dancers.⁵⁰

Messer had died just after I started my research four decades ago, and since then much has changed. Since music and dance in New Brunswick and the other Maritime provinces are now different in such aspects as repertoires, styles, venues, and social values, I now ask: what from this old experience is relevant today? I think it is important for us to be able to talk about our music business across the genre differences that separate us, and studying the variety of *transactions* in the music business is one way of doing this. This has taught me that art and utility are two sides of the same coin and that the production and marketing of art is shaped through the fabric of transactions. This brings me to tradition.

Tradition

I end with the question: 'What *isn't* traditional?' In my introduction to *Transforming Tradition* I examined the thinking of folklorists who connected 'tradition' to the idea of performance as 'the nexus between the individual and the society'.⁵¹ Today, I see performance as one part

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of a transaction, always nesting in a cluster of traditions. Tradition exists not just in how and what the fiddler plays or the dancer steps, but in how fiddle contests are run, who organises the dances, and a myriad of other practices. Henry Glassie says:

Tradition can be static, and it can be fluid; it can whirl in place, revolving through kaleidoscopic transformations, or it can strike helical, progressive, or retrograde tracks through time.⁵²

Vivid words, but I think you will find it worth your while to look carefully at your own music business life, with the idea that your daily transactions involve traditional patterns. I have found this vital to making decisions about how to utilise my own art and to understand how others utilise theirs.

Notes

¹ ‘Father of Bluegrass’ Bill Monroe, in an interview with Ralph Rinzler, described the fiddle as ‘the first child’ of the bluegrass instrument family (the banjo was the fifth – after mandolin, guitar, and bass). Bill Monroe and Ralph Rinzler, ‘Ralph Rinzler Interviews Bill Monroe’ (Track 21), on *Happy Birthday Bill Monroe: Dawg Plays Big Mon*, Acoustic Oasis ACD-77, 2011. The liner notes indicate that the interview was recorded in New York City by David Grisman in 1965 and was previously unissued.

² See Neil V. Rosenberg, ‘Picking Myself Apart: A Hoosier Memoir’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 108, no. 429 (1995), 277–286.

³ Shorty Shehan, Roger Smith, Vassar Clements, Bernard Lee, Birch Monroe, Byron Berline, Thurman Percifield, Jimmy Campbell, Pat Dunford, Art Rosenbaum, Clayton McMichen, and Benny Martin, are the names of fiddlers that I can recall playing with.

⁴ See Dan Ben-Amos, ‘Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context’, in *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, ed. by Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), pp. 3–15.

⁵ On the banjo and the mandolin.

⁶ Burt Feintuch, ‘Editor’s Introduction: Words in Common’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 108, no. 430 (1995), 391–394.

⁷ Neil V. Rosenberg, ‘Strategy and Tactics in Fieldwork: The Whole Don Messer Show’, in *The World Observed: Reflections on the Fieldwork Process*, ed. by Edward D. Ives and Bruce Jackson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 145.

⁸ Henry Glassie, ‘Tradition’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 108, no. 430 (1995), 395–412 (p. 395).

⁹ Glassie, p. 409.

¹⁰ ‘PENs’ in the jargon of folkloristics.

¹¹ Owe Ronström, ‘Fiddling with Pasts: From Tradition to Heritage’, in *Crossing Over: Fiddle and Dance Studies from Around the North Atlantic 3*, ed. by Ian Russell and Anna Kearney Guigné (Aberdeen & St. John’s: Elphinstone Institute & Dept. of Folklore/School of Music/MMaP, 2010), pp. 265–282.

¹² George M. Story, William J. Kirwin, and John D.A. Widdowson, eds, ‘Fiddle’, in *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, 2nd edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 173.

¹³ Fiddle, accordion, harmonica, voice – all were used for dances in historic outport Newfoundland.

¹⁴ MS, personal letter to Neil V. Rosenberg, 6 March, 1972.

¹⁵ The process that started the contemporary Newfoundland fiddle music revival began in 1974 with recordings from MUNFLA of Benoit and Guinard. Kelly Russell heard a demo tape that included them prepared by Peter Narváez for a public open house showcasing research at Memorial. See Peter Narváez, 'Country Music in Diffusion: Juxtaposition and Syncretism in the Popular Music of Newfoundland' in *Sonny's Dream: Essays on Newfoundland Folklore and Popular Culture* (St. John's: Memorial University Folklore and Language Archive Publications, 2012), p. 273, fn. 6.

¹⁶ Neil V. Rosenberg, 'Studying Country Music and Contemporary Folk Music Traditions in the Maritimes: Theory, Techniques and the Archivist', *Phonographic Bulletin*, 14 (1976), 18–21.

¹⁷ Narváez gives a good introduction in the first paragraph of his 'Newfoundland Vernacular Song', in *Sonny's Dream*, p. 105.

¹⁸ I wish I'd taken notes! There may have been staged dancing but I think I would have remembered that.

¹⁹ LeBlanc's career fits well with the model I present in Neil V. Rosenberg, 'Big Fish, Small Pond: Country Musicians and their Markets', in *Media Sense: The Folklore-Popular Culture Continuum*, ed. by Peter Narváez and Martin Laba (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1986), pp. 148–166.

²⁰ From my fieldnotes (6 May 1975) after interviewing dance accordionist Gordon Stilwell in Saint John, NB.: 'Gordon said he would go to Kidd Baker shows just to see Fiddlin' Cy who was a fine fiddler and could really fill in behind singing, etc.'

²¹ Vic Mullen, interview with author, Dartmouth, NS, 28 July 1978, Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), accession number 75-288, tape F3087/C3083.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Ranceford 'Kidd' Baker, interview with author, Woodstock, NB, 2 August 1973. Baker prefaced his description of Leblanc's act with a discussion of ethnicity in his audiences. He told me Eloi was with him for thirteen years.

²⁴ Bio (with photo) from: *La Famille Leger*, <http://www.acadianfiddle.com/artists2/2015/1/29/eloi-leblanc> [accessed May 2015]. A recording of Leblanc was included on *Bellows and Bows: The Anthology of Canadian Fiddle and Accordion Music*, ed. by Sherry Johnson, CD06, St. John's NL: Centre for Music, Media and Place, Back on Track Series, 2012.

²⁵ Mooring can also be heard on *Bellows and Bows*.

²⁶ See Dawn Williams, 'How to Make Use of Private Label Rights Products and Not Fail!', <http://www.r-o-d-d-y-t-r-u-m-p-e-t.cc/olcott.html> [accessed May 2012, not found in 2018], and <http://www.northwestladybug.com/2007/10/smattering-of-memories-of-growing-up-in.html> [accessed May 2012]. Both describe the Berkeley dance cotillions of Dart Tinkham – first from a musician's viewpoint, the second from a dancer's perspective.

²⁷ I was unaware of 'old-time' as a musical category until the New Lost City Ramblers began their career in 1959.

²⁸ I describe the Doane brothers in my article, 'The Politics of Organology and the Nova Scotia Banjo: An Essay in Honour of Beverley Diamond', in *Music Traditions, Cultures, and Contexts*, ed. by Robin Elliott and Gordon E. Smith (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), pp. 181–207.

²⁹ Vernon Doane interview with author, Gunning Cove, NS, 23 November 1974, Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), Accession number 85-241, tape F7778/C7863; John Maxwell 'Mac' Doane interview with author, Saint John, NB, 17 April 1975, Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), Accession number 85-241, tape F7796/C7881.

³⁰ Older women from locally prominent families organized the benefit. Everybody had party lines, and there were few secrets! It took them about four months to hear that a new musician had moved into Pleasant Villa. Imagine Alice Munro writing about this – rural New Brunswick was not very different from rural southern Ontario and the Ottawa Valley, places she writes about so compellingly. Indeed, much of these transactions and the discourse surrounding them reminded me of my mother’s family, small farm town people from southern Michigan who’d migrated to Washington State.

³¹ ‘Head, Heart, Hands, and Health’ are the 4 Hs in the green four-leaf clover that is the logo/symbol of this youth development organization with a rural/agricultural focus, formed in the U.S. in the early twentieth century, eventually becoming international. See ‘4-H’, Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4-H> [accessed May 2012].

³² Drinking was a constant topic! In a predominately Protestant milieu I heard stories of alcoholism, teetotalling, backsliding; the dangers of the road life of touring musicians, the pleasures of drinking and playing music at parties, etc.

³³ ‘Well you right and left and then you, when you meet your partner, you dance’. ‘Mac’ Doane interview, op cit.

³⁴ All three of these tunes were in Don Messer’s repertoire.

³⁵ The former country stars were Ray and Ann Little. He told me the name of the caller, but I failed to note it. I wasn’t thinking of dance at that point – early in the fieldwork – as part of what I was studying. Later, in 23 July 1975 issue of the Woodstock Bugle, I noticed an ad for a square dance: only the name of the caller was given.

³⁶ Cottage, cabin, etc.: a rural weekend/vacation home.

³⁷ From my fieldnotes (12 October 1974) Salmon River (near Chipman), New Brunswick: ‘It was as if a dance and a jam session were going on at the same time, a very easy and pleasant situation, considering the general drunkenness. At various times each of the musicians was embraced and kissed by a well-juiced lady whose persona included, apparently, ‘letting go’ at parties like this. At one point a drunk was observed dancing about with a 5–6 inch trout in hand’.

³⁸ I’d gone to a dance hosted by Fredericton radio country singer Aubrey Hanson. Not long after that, at a time when I was out of town, George Hector played a dance there. ‘People had been quite happy with his music for the dance, and had liked it much better than the music provided by Aubrey Hanson which was denounced for its perfunctory nature, especially the Paul Jones and Grand March and Circle’. Fieldnotes (1 August, 1975) Queenstown, New Brunswick.

³⁹ When I began studying folk music and ethnomusicology, one of the first intellectual challenges I encountered concerned the arts. The concept of ‘art’, I learned, rested on some kind of concept of aesthetics. My teacher, Alan P. Merriam, was just writing *The Anthropology of Music*, and, in a chapter entitled ‘Aesthetics and the Interrelationship of the Arts’ he discussed ‘the difficulty of cross-cultural application of the aesthetic concept’. Merriam argued that he couldn’t know for certain if his first nations and tribal African musical informants had a concept of aesthetics about their music. He couldn’t know for certain because they didn’t talk about the six ‘components’ of the aesthetic concept. I came to view this as a tree-falling-in-the-forest kind of argument.

⁴⁰ This quote is indirect, taken from my fieldnotes.

⁴¹ Oscar placed second.

⁴² Also a regular was Mac Brogan, the contest fiddler who’d introduced me to Oscar. Unless the party was at his house, he didn’t play any fiddle. He carried a thumb pick and an electric bass to parties at Oscar’s in Chipman and nearby. At the time he’d just had open-heart surgery, his health was sometimes precarious, so he didn’t party as much he had in the past.

⁴³ ‘Sean McGuire’, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sean_McGuire [accessed 20 May 2012].

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⁴⁴ 'Winston Fitzgerald', Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winston_Fitzgerald [accessed May 2012].

⁴⁵ Davidson's brother Bill played fiddle with Hank Snow; another brother George Davidson was a noted local storyteller and character.

⁴⁶ Oscar's Fitzgerald story in my fieldnotes, (2 February 1975) Upper Hampstead, NB.

⁴⁷ Details were discussed – pay, band members, what's expected in the way of music and so forth, and that's how the evening ended.

⁴⁸ Our Junior High School Orchestra rehearsed weekly and twice a year at graduation, as new graduates paraded across the stage, we played Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*. It seemed to go on forever. We Orchestra members became so bored by it that we tried to negotiate with one graduating class to play something else. But they refused to deviate from the sentimental favourite, so *Pomp and Circumstance* it was.

⁴⁹ Mac Brogan interview with author, Chipman, NB, 5 August 1973. Available at the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), accession number 75-288, tape F3092/C3088.

⁵⁰ For more on Don Messer, see Lester B. Sellick, *Canada's Don Messer* (Kentville, NS: Kentville Publishing Company, 1969); Li Robbins, *Don Messer's Violin: Canada's Fiddle* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005); Johanna Bertin, *Don Messer: The Man behind the Music* (Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 2009).

⁵¹ Neil V. Rosenberg, 'Introduction', in *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 1–25.

⁵² Glassie, p. 405.