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Czech Bluegrass Fiddlers and their Negotiations of Past and Present

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Czech Bluegrass Fiddlers and their Negotiations of Past and Present

By Lee Bidgood

Why the fiddle?

Proč ty housle? (“Why the fiddle?”) – “Fiddlers are all bad here – Why not write about the banjo or something else that Czechs are good at?”

These questions about my ethnographic fieldwork came from musician colleagues with whom I was working in researching bluegrass music in the Czech Republic, during a jam circle around a table. While these colleagues were mainly banjo and guitar players, these critiques of Czech fiddling are common even among Czech fiddlers, who are in many cases not as accomplished (in technical skill or musicality) as are their banjo-playing and mandolin-picking compatriots.

Since I am a fiddler, however, I inevitably attract and am drawn to other fiddlers in my Czech research. Over the past decade I have played and spoken with many of the leading Czech bluegrass fiddlers, as well as many more who are less acclaimed. Through these experiences (both in formal ethnographic and in informal interactions) I gradually developed not only a sense of what Czech fiddlers were doing, but of the negotiations they undertake in learning the technique, repertory, and style that they perform.

I’ll begin with a discussion of the fiddle and its role in bluegrass history – and in establishing bluegrass as a music with a sense of history. I’ll then provide a sketch of Czech bluegrass-related fiddling through a discussion of the career of Franta Kacafirek, an influential fiddler from the first generation of bluegrass players who I met towards the end of my 2007-8 fieldwork year.

Kacafirek, unlike younger bluegrassers, lived a large portion of his life under the control of state socialism, in which the Communist

Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers, a group that featured the “driving fiddle” of Clayton McMichen (Peterson 1997, 213). Monroe’s efforts at mid-century were successful in the mainstream of popular music as a form of music distinct both from the “amplified guitar sounds of honky-tonk country music and rockabilly” whose rowdy chords buoyed Hank Williams through the 1950s.

As Monroe persisted in developing his music as a distinct style that maintained its direct ties to traditions like breakdown-style fiddling, bluegrass served as a grittier alternative to the “lush, orchestrated strings of the Nashville sound” that predominated country in the 1960s (Peterson 1997, 213). Rosenberg’s account of the consolidation of bluegrass as a style shows that most Nashville recording sessions were using “studio musicians” to achieve the uniform ensemble sound that began to predominate through the 1950s – a shift that in most cases removed the fiddle as a prominent lead instrument in most major-studio-recorded tracks (Rosenberg 2005, 129). In a shift from the developing Nashville recording standards, Decca Records (the company with which Bill Monroe contracted to work in this period) allowed Monroe to use the band he toured with (the changing lineup of “Blue Grass Boys”) as his backing group in the recording studio, realizing that “Monroe’s band ‘sound’ was an important part of his success as a recording artist” (Rosenberg 2005, 100).

Bluegrass music is, in some ways, simply a specific configuration of instruments and styles – and since its crystallization in the 1940-50s it has almost always featured the fiddle. Bill Monroe’s first band of “Blue Grass Boys” in 1939 included fiddler Art Wooten, as did almost all later incarnations of his seminal group (Rosenberg 2005). There is a distinctive technique or set of techniques that are essential for bluegrass instruments like the banjo and mandolin, but the particular sound of the fiddle is quite flexible, ranging from Art Wooten’s driving rhythm to Kenny Baker’s smooth, stark melodies (such as the classic and moody instrumental Monroe showpiece that featured Baker, “Jerusalem Ridge”) and Vassar Clement’s more edgy, jazz-inflected sound (what Clements calls “hillbilly jazz,”¹³ a mix of jazz and breakdown fiddling that he was developing in his years playing with Bill Monroe, and

which is evident in such recordings as the 1950 “New Muleskinner Blues”). This stylistic flexibility may stem in part from the fact that while the banjo and mandolin were reinvented in the creation of the bluegrass sound, the fiddle served as a link to “old-time” fiddling and other string-band and “country” music traditions.

A related tradition shows that this situation is not unique to bluegrass – and emphasizes the tangled web of influence in the creation of tradition. Bob Wills’ establishment of a hot, jazz-inflected stringband sound in the 1920s-30s was another form of this mediation of past and present, one featuring violin techniques reminiscent more of fiddlers like Eddie South and Joe Venuti than Pen Vandiver and Ed Haley. In their innovation of a driving, more deftly arranged ensemble texture, however, Wills and other Southwestern musicians were drawing from a tradition of virtuosic performance established by fiddlers like Texan Alexander “Eck” Robertson.

The play of old and new that thrives in fiddle performance has made the fiddle both a platform for innovative creative expression, but also a battleground for the creation and maintenance of “tradition.” The fiddle sounds that have bloomed from this ground have been a key part of bluegrass music’s paradoxical effectiveness as both a modern and antimodern⁴ expression. Monroe used the fiddle to establish his group’s sound both as a musical style and as a practice of traditionalism. Following Robert Cantwell’s characterization of bluegrass as an “original ... representation of traditional Appalachian music in its social form” I classify bluegrass (both as it was created by Bill Monroe and others of his generation, and as it is performed today) as “traditionalist,” as an innovative endeavor that works to create a sense of tradition (Cantwell 1984, ix). Monroe encapsulated this self-conscious union of past and present in his composition and performance of the now-“standard” bluegrass song “Uncle Pen.” In this song’s text, Monroe memorializes his Uncle Pen Vandiver and the practices of music-making (fiddling in particular) and dance from an earlier era and links himself and his performance with that bygone situation.

The fiddle plays a prominent role in Monroe’s recorded

performance of this tune, and the arrangement he founded persists as the “Standard” way of playing this evergreen on stage and in parking-lot picking sessions. The fiddle usually starts the piece, playing an instrumental break rhythmically tied to the “shuffle bowing” (a long bowstroke followed by two strokes half as long) that is the basic rhythmic motive and bowing pattern of old-time fiddling. The double stops and pitch-shaping that Merle “Red” Taylor used in the primary Monroe recording of this song have become part of the arrangement of this tune, underlining the connection to old-time fiddling. At the same time, though, this break is a newly composed “representation” of the style, an exemplar of the sort of transformation Cantwell indicates. The “tag” at the end of the song (after the final iteration of the fiddle break) is – following Monroe’s recording – usually a few choruses of the old fiddle tune “Jenny Lynn,” which is part of the litany of old time tunes that Monroe embedded in the song’s lyrics. As a conscious association of the song and singer with all things “old time,” this reference to an old fiddle tune (where, according to the song’s narrator “that’s where the fiddlin’ begins”) shows where fiddling has ended up – a mixture of old and new – or perhaps, more exactly, a new thing that constantly refers to and re-performs the “old.”

Early Czech Bluegrass-Related Fiddling

The diversity of chronological and style associations in bluegrass fiddle playing in some cases can encourage innovation and other developments. In the Czech Republic, however, the range of bluegrass fiddle possibilities has made emulation more difficult. Anxiety in the Czech bluegrass world (both from fiddlers and non-fiddlers) about the quality of local fiddling thus has a grounding in musical fact, or at least in socio-musical likelihood. When Czechs encountered bluegrass music recordings via US Armed Forces Network broadcasts and other sources after the Second World War, they heard the variety of bluegrass fiddle styles, but not the historical context of US string band music such as the variety of “old time” and popular techniques and repertoires familiar to US fiddlers. Without a firm technical or stylistic model Czech bluegrass fiddlers have drawn from classical, jazz, and local

folklore in their efforts to present appropriate fiddle performances.

Petr Bryndáč’s fiddling with the group Greenhorns⁵ underscores the eclectic mix that Czech fiddlers created during the period of their first exposure to bluegrass in the 1950s and 1960s. As shown in a Czech Television clip of the group playing their hit “Zatracenej Život” from ca. 1970,⁶ Bryndáč’s melodic and rhythmic efforts are a mix that reflect the aimless exuberance of bluegrass-related music making efforts of the period. For example, Bryndáč follows the rhythmic feel created by the band, putting a strong emphasis on the downbeat of the $\frac{3}{4}$ -time metric grid, highlighting what my Czech colleagues have often called the “polka” feel. Bryndáč also uses vibrato, double-stop combinations, and emphatic triplet ornaments that sound foreign, especially when compared to bluegrass and other Americana fiddle styles of the 1950s and 1960s.

This clip also shows Czech banjo pioneer Marko Čermák with his version of banjo picking “rolls” – a choreography of the right fingers’ plucking that doesn’t correspond with the rolling patterns of Earl Scruggs. While Bryndáč’s eclectic playing doesn’t definitively place the group in terms of genre (due to the stylistic flexibility in fiddling), Čermák’s playing does: the specific technique of Scruggs style three finger banjo picking is in some ways central to the signature sound of bluegrass. While the two Czech musicians (along with their band) reproduce some parts of the texture of bluegrass sound as it existed in the 1950s and ‘60s, they don’t perform in ways that reveal a deep knowledge of the bluegrass canon.

While Bryndáč’s role in shaping Czech bluegrass was considerable due to his part in the initial popularity of the Greenhorns, his influence quickly faded. His style of playing, unlike the repertory of songs that the Greenhorns produced, did not become standard in Czech bluegrass-related music practice. Bryndáč’s successor with Greenhorns, Franta Kacafirek, has had a more significant influence on succeeding generations of Czech fiddlers. A figure who links the earliest period of Czech bluegrass (and fiddling) with the present, Franta Kacafirek is one of the most successful professional musicians that I have worked with in the Czech Republic.

The series of events that brought me to Kacafírek's door in May, 2008 serves to indicate the ways I established contacts with field colleagues, and gives a sense of my field experiences. This particular trail began when my sometime band mate Eda Kristůfek (that spring he had stopped playing with the group Roll's Boys, a band with whom I have played on occasion, since 2004) suggested I attend a concert in which he and some other musicians were staging a reunion of the band *Zvonky* ("Bells"). This group began performing in the mid-1970s and featured Eda on mandolin, his brother Pavel on banjo, as well as some other Czech bluegrass luminaries. Eager to encounter some Czech bluegrass history, I made my way to U Vodárny, a bluegrass-friendly venue that began to host weekly performances after the closing of standby CI-5 in Smíchov.

At this concert *Zvonky* were the guests of host band Monogram. At many Czech concerts I attended such guests or "*hosti*" would perform a set between two sets played by the (usually more prominent) hosting band. I enjoyed the opening set by Monogram, who I have heard many times; they are one of the young, hot bands on the Czech scene, showcasing virtuosic banjo and mandolin-picking from the Jahoda brothers, Jarda and Zdeněk, as well as skilled guitar solos and singing from Jakub Racek. I was underwhelmed by *Zvonky*, however. Eda and Pavel Kristůfek are polished instrumentalists, and the other performers were doing convincing things, but I didn't have the context to appreciate (in ways the other audience members did) the old hits that they dusted off in their set – and for which other, older audience members applauded enthusiastically!

That night, in addition to learning about the history of this obscure but well-loved group, I discovered someone that I was eager to speak with. František Kacafírek, whose name I had heard mentioned as an eminent Czech fiddle player, had apparently played with *Zvonky* for a period ca. 1980, and was part of the reunion. I decided to try and speak with him. I steeled myself for the unprepared solicitation, and during the break found my way back to the bands' green room. When I made my hesitant introduction, Kacafírek's reaction was – as I expected – a bit stand-off-ish, but he quickly warmed and became curious as my

American accent filtered through the Czech words I was using. He was especially interested to learn that I was a fiddler myself and agreed to an interview – and also to some jamming – after he finished a recording project. He was working with the *Zelenáči*, a recently reformed version of the Greenhorns, with whom he has played (in one of its several forms) since 1980. Not wanting to impose on the musical life of an icon of Czech bluegrass, I waited until the middle of the next week for them to finish up in the studio, and then gave Kacafírek a call.

After a brief telephone exchange, and with directions in hand, I set off with fiddle and video camera in tow to find Kacafírek's house. I was surprised to learn that he lived a few blocks' walk from the subway station my wife used every day to get to work. Thus a short ride on the metro brought me to his doorstep, where I was immersed in an older world of Czech bluegrass than I had previously encountered.

Kacafírek and History

František ("Franta") Kacafírek has played an important role in shaping what Czech Bluegrass is today: longtime fiddler in the group *Zelenáči* /Greenhorns, subsequently a part of the phenomenal band *Blanket*, and currently violinist for punk/alt-rock band *Tři Sestry* ("Three Sisters"). His career as a musician, which is long and multi-faceted, has profoundly shaped the Czech bluegrass experience. Kacafírek is an exceptional figure in that he has made a living as a musician for his entire working life, and in his connections to influential groups. At the same time he also presents himself as what he jokingly called in an interview *malinku Kacafírek* ("tiny Kacafírek") who is just a small part of the bluegrass world, another – in his words – *bluegrassista* ("bluegrasser") who is just trying to play bluegrass.

Kacafírek began his musical career like many Czechs (who are typically provided musical lessons in primary school), with instruction in classical violin – with the added pressure of a father who was an accomplished flutist. After an adolescent period of resistance (in which he didn't play the instrument for years), Kacafírek began an apprenticeship with a machinist. He disliked the work intensely, and

quit – vowing in an inspired moment that he would make his living playing the violin.

Unlike his father, Kacafirek did not make his mark playing art music, but has formed a career playing other sorts of music. As he told me during the course of interviews conducted in the spring and summer of 2008, Kacafirek has been fortunate enough to have seen this vow hold through several decades.

1971 - 1974	country skupina FALEŠNÍ HRÁČI
1974 - 1976	skupiny PRŮVAN a KŘUPANI
1976 - 1978	POSLEDNÍ SEDMA, Paleček-Janík, SEMAFOR (P. Bobek)
1987 - 1989	Pavel Bobek
1982 - 1994	POUTNÍCI, BLANKET
1995 - 1997	GRASS COLORS
1980 - 1990	ZELENÁČI
od. r. 1990	ZELENÁČI Mirka Hoffmanna ⁷

This chronology, taken from Kacafirek's "profile" page on the Greenhorns / *Zelenáči* web site, does not show all the many groups that he has played in – *Zvonky*, for instance. It does list the most successful ones, though, showing Kacafirek working at the very top level of the Czech bluegrass scene. Interestingly, his work with the punk band *Tři Sestry* is not mentioned here, although he actively plays in the group at present. I learned about his work with this band when I asked about the gold record hanging, framed, on a wall at his house – with *Tři Sestry*, he was part of a record project that sold more than the Czech gold-record mark of 15,000, a feat seldom (if ever) accomplished in the bluegrass world.

Although he began playing with *Zelenáči* after their period of greatest popular acclaim in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Kacafirek enjoyed (and contributed to) their continuing success. One of the most remarkable (and influential) parts of his work with this group in the 1980s was traveling to Germany with the group to perform at the Karl May Festspiele in Elspe, Westphalia. *Zelenáči* were one of the house bands for the event, playing and singing in evocation of the

“Old West” at the saloon.

As Kacafirek's assorted musical projects indicate, he performs in a wide range of styles – from classical to jazz and even punk! What's more, as he explained to me, *Zelenáči* are not (and have not been), strictly speaking, a bluegrass band. *Zelenáči* employed musical, thematic, and textual elements (such as Scrugg-style banjo playing, close-harmony singing, break-down-style fiddling, motifs and narratives of home, nature, and love) that were drawn from American bluegrass, and many Czechs would go on to appreciate and perform a more strictly bluegrass musicality because of hearing the group's recordings. However, *Zelenáči* are most correctly considered within the realm of “Czech Country” – a category that they in large part created as a combination of the American bluegrass and country with Czech tramp and folk elements.

Even while working in this somewhat diluted bluegrass context, Kacafirek's prestige as a fiddler was unmatched in the more orthodox Czech bluegrass music scene. With fellow Prager Petr Kůs, Kacafirek played in *Blanket*, a group acclaimed by Czech bluegrassers as the premiere bluegrass band in the period of late socialism through the 1980s. *Blanket*'s period of greatest success was marked by a tour through Czechoslovakia with pop superstar Karel Gott, in which they played in, as Kacafirek put it, large, sold-out stadiums full of thousands of people. *Blanket* fizzled in the transition to post-socialism ca. 1989, but are remembered in bootleg recordings and a few published albums cherished by today's bluegrassers, the performance of songs (mostly translated or composed by Kůs) that *Blanket* made famous, and in a revival of the group's original lineup that has continued since a reunion in 2008.

Zelenáči's slow decline in popularity through the 1980s, meanwhile, was paralleled by a reduction of bluegrass-related music in the mainstream of Czech (and Czechoslovak) popular music. Kacafirek continued through the 1990s with a version of the Greenhorns led by founding member Mírek Hoffman, but their performances are increasingly in the realm of “oldies.” Ironically, Kacafirek's more recent work with *Tři Sestry*, whose punk stylings are popular with

a more recent generational wave than Greenhorns fans, is part of a performance of nostalgia by the generation-X crowd that is itself becoming middle-aged.

After he related his life history as a musician, Kacafirek talked about the present with some regret about the way that the bluegrass-related community has aged as his career has progressed. He marks 1989 in particular as a watershed moment in the nature of the relationships that he has enjoyed, along with the music, for decades. I will quote him here at length:

... ale driv to fungovalo

lip teda

ted je to jak takovy ze se to kazdy

na svy pisecku jak se rika

...

LB myslis ze byval za totality⁸ jinak

FK hele za totality

to bylo lepší bych řekl

to všichni byli pohromadě panč

jsme byli společně přítele

ale to bylo komunista teda

to byl celej ten režim tady komunistickéj

dneska je to takovej že nikdo nema žádnéj přítele

muže dělat uplne co chce

že jo

...

dneska to je

nedržejí pohromadě jak takhle

...

a mladé kluci třeba Jírka Králík

ja nevím kolik Jírkovi Králíkovi je

a Pepa Málina to jsou vlastně mládí kluci pro mě

ale nemyslím to hanlivě

...

ja třeba Pepa Malina vlastně ani neznám

ja jenom vim že existuje

a ja myslím že kdybysme se potkali na ulfci že se ani nepoznáme.
panč

jak vypadám já

jak vypadá on

to je to že je tak malá republika a vlastně

oba dva se zajímáme vo stejnou hudbu

tak mi to přijde divný teda

... but it worked before

better

now it's like each person

in their own sandbox so to speak

...

you think it was otherwise before 1989?

hey during communism

it was better I would say

everyone was together

we were altogether friends

but it was communist then

it was the whole communist regime here

today it's like no one has

any friends

you can do anything you want

you know

...

today

they don't hold together like that

...

and young guys like Jirka Kralik

I don't know how old Jirka Kralik is

and Pepa Malina, these are just young guys for me

but I don't mean this pejoratively

...

For example I don't even know Pepa Malina

I just know that he exists

one, is not “plugged-in” to these technologies – he does use a modern mobile phone, but I have yet to connect with him via email. Younger Czech bluegrassers, however, have embraced these new media.

One good example is that of Petr Hrubý, a Prague-based bluegrass guitarist and singer. Hrubý has launched a website on which he organizes and spreads information about “open jams” in public places throughout the Czech Republic.¹⁰ The online discussion forum at www.bgcz.net is another active forum that has emerged in recent years as an information center for rides to festivals, instrument classified ads, and a lively discussion of all sorts of bluegrass topics.

Kacafirek’s regret about the fading of an older era and generation of Czech bluegrass music-making is linked to his time and place. I am grateful to have recordings of our interviews about his fiddle work, and his unique place in history. I am currently working on a film that features Marko Čermák, Kacafirek’s Greenhorns bandmate.

Along with these documentary projects, I hope to keep working to revive community, in more directed ways than I have during the earlier stages of my fieldwork. Along with Kacafirek, I hope to organize something like what he proposed in our interview, a “Czech fiddle summit” that would bring together fiddlers across the geographic, relational, and generational divides that often separate them.

I would hope that in that event, as in this essay, the legacy of Czech fiddling that present-day musicians draw on would grow as it is shared between participants. Kacafirek witnesses to the fact that, even with an open society and new media technologies, there are still barriers to communication and community among Czech bluegrassers. I hope that as Czech fiddlers are able to access more information about the variety of American fiddle styles that contribute to bluegrass sounds, they are also using these same information technologies to connect with each other. As ever, the richness of musical life still depends on personal interaction and community life, which is thriving, in new and changing ways.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 Gura and Bollman (1999) entitled their volume "America's Instrument" to describe the banjo in the 19th century. See Conway (1995) and Buisseret and Reinhardt (2000) for evocative historical description of fiddling as an earlier (colonial-era) element of "creolized" American culture and musicality.
- 2 While Titon finds in the early twentieth century mediation and discussion of these fiddlers' performances a simple explanation for the burgeoning fascination with "old-time" music for the rest of the century, Gavin Campbell (2004) and David Whisnant (1983) find more sinister motives behind the recourse to tradition in the early 1900s. The performance of racial consciousness in fiddling has a long history in the Americas, stretching back to the early colonial days.
- 3 <http://www.vassarclements.com/hillbilly.html> - Accessed 2010-9-23.
- 4 I use the term in the sense that Lears employs it, to indicate the ambivalence and affinity for the modern, and Modern American society's "complex blend of accommodation and protest" with regard to modernity (Lears 1994, xv).
- 5 Also known as "Zelenáci" after use of English was restricted ca. 1971 (see Elavsky 2005, 101-172 for more on the Czech music industry under communism) this group formed in the mid-1960s after banjoist Marko Čermák built a banjo using photographs of Pete Seeger's banjo at a 1964 Prague concert and organized a few musicians to play bluegrass and country songs.
- 6 This song is a retexting by lead singer Jan Vyčítal of the Seitz/Rader classic "that was before I met you. The video, at the time of this writing, is difficult to access in the Czech television archives, but is available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssVborBaUNw&feature=related>
- 7 <http://www.zelenaci.cz/profil/fk/default.htm> - accessed 2010-7-8

- 8 *Za totality* literally means "during totalitarianism," shorthand for the communist period.
- 9 Kacafirek interview 2010-5-13
- 10 See the European Bluegrass Music Association's discussion of jamming efforts here: <http://www.ebma.org/bluegrass-white-papers/about-jam-sessions/>