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Devil in the Strawstack, Devil in the Details:  
A Comparative Study of Old-Time Fiddle Tune Transcriptions

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Appalachian Studies  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Appalachian Studies

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by  
Kalia Yeagle  
May 2020

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Dr. Nate Olson, Chair  
Mr. Roy Andrade  
Dr. Jane MacMorran

Keywords: Old-time music, fiddle tunes, music transcription, ethnomusicology, American folk music

## ABSTRACT

Devil in the Strawstack, Devil in the Details:

A Comparative Study of Old-Time Fiddle Tune Transcriptions

by

Kalia Yeagle

This thesis asks what transcriptions of old-time fiddle tunes might tell us about their underlying purposes and the nature of transcription. How could differing approaches to transcription reflect the intentions of the author, and what are those intentions? What does this suggest about how aural information is prioritized? Through a comparative analysis of three transcriptions of the same recording—Tommy Jarrell’s “Devil in the Strawstack”—this thesis examines how musical information is prioritized and how transcribers have adapted their methods to better reflect the nuances of old-time music. The three transcriptions come from Clare Milliner and Walt Koken (*The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes*), Drew Beisswenger (*Appalachian Fiddle Tunes*), and John Engle. The analysis of these transcriptions suggests new frameworks for interpreting old-time fiddling, further conversations about the possibilities and limitations of transcription, and provides insight into the underlying purposes of transcription.

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I thank Roy for the conversations that inspired this thesis. I look forward to continuing to celebrate the magic of this music, and helping our students find it for themselves.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

For nearly a century, folklorists, record companies, field recorders, and “revivalists” have taken an interest in documenting old-time music. For those who create transcriptions of the music, there has always been an essential challenge in the process. Ruth Crawford Seeger, a composer and transcriber for groundbreaking folk song collections in the mid-twentieth century, hinted at this challenge when she said: “No one who has studied these or similar recordings can deny that the song and its singing are indissolubly connected—that the character of a song depends to a great extent on the *manner of its singing*.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon, in his book *Old-Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes*, comments on how “the tune is alive in the fiddler’s body. Like any aesthetic object, its life revolves around form and memories and possibilities.”<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on information beyond the content of a melody or the words of a song is tied up in the task of transcribing old-time music; it suggests that there is a fundamental difference between the notes on a page and the performance of a tune. How, then, does a transcriber choose to transcribe old-time tunes? What information makes it on the page and what does not?

This thesis asks what transcriptions might tell us about the nature of transcription and their underlying purposes. How do differing approaches to transcription reflect the intentions of the author, and what are those intentions? What does this suggest about how information is prioritized? To explore these questions, I conducted a comparative analysis of three transcriptions of Tommy Jarrell’s “Devil in the Strawstack.” I examined transcriptions from Clare Milliner and Walt Koken’s *The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes*

<sup>1</sup> John Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Our Singing Country* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), xviii.

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, *Old-Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001), 11.

(2011), Roy Andrade, Drew Beisswenger, and Scott Prouty's forthcoming *Appalachian Fiddle Tunes*, and examples from the private collection of North Carolina fiddler John Engle. Each demonstrates a distinct approach to documenting the same sounds, and by placing them in direct comparison, their similarities and differences are clearer. Together they help describe the range of information that a transcription can contain, and reveal how the prioritization of different information indicates an author's intentions and the underlying purposes of the transcription.

Notably, each of these transcription approaches presents different types of amendments or alternatives to standard western notation in order to better represent the non-standard sounds of old-time music. These include questioning the norms of marking time, introducing new symbols for pitch variation, and the creation of a new notation system centered around bow strokes. This thesis takes a keen interest in the act of grounding the sounds of old-time music on paper. To begin the task of answering my guiding questions, I start by asking what transcription is, what it can and cannot provide, and what purposes it can serve. I also look intentionally at what "old-time music" means and how it relates to transcription historically. Most crucially, I explore how transcriptions of old-time fiddle tunes go about revealing the underlying purposes of their authors.

### *Overview of Chapters*

Chapter 2 examines the concept of transcription as it exists within the field of ethnomusicology, including an investigation of what the literature defines as the essential purposes and limitations of transcription. The chapter also surveys the relevant literature that grounds my core transcriptions in the broader interrelating story of old-time music, Appalachia, and transcription. More specifically, I examine the significance of field recorders, collectors,

commercial music, enthusiasts, and folk revivalists in documenting and shaping the music and its associated places, leading us to the relevance of contemporary old-time transcribers.

Chapter 3 provides my methodological framework, including the assumptions that guide my research, a summary of the research process, and explanation of the categories used for musicological analysis.

Chapter 4 presents the analysis of the three focus transcriptions, beginning with background on the recorded performance and artist, introductions of the transcribers, and their process of transcribing (“Transcription as Act”). The majority of the chapter consists of a section titled “Transcription as Outcome,” the musicological analysis that reveals moments of similarity and difference amongst the transcriptions. I employ six categories to structure the analysis: variations, beats and crookedness, tunings and double stops, pitch, modes and key signatures, and bowing. The transcriptions communicate a wide range of information, some explicit (ex: note choices, rhythms) and some implicit (ex: including certain double stops ends up suggesting that the bow should move in a particular way). Some noteworthy distinctions between the transcriptions include differing approaches to grouping phrases or other units of measure (excluding bar lines, relying on beat groupings, visually distributing phrases, labeling parts), inclusion of variations (a lot, some, or none, plus differing “core” versions), and introducing non-standard symbols like slanted lines and arrows to indicate pitch variation. Engle’s bowing transcription represents an entirely non-standard notation method, relying instead on his self-developed system of tick marks to indicate bow strokes and shading to group patterns together.

Chapter 5 explores how the musicological analysis suggest the intentions of the authors and what those intentions are, and opens a discussion on the broader implications of the research and further questions it raises. I conclude with some additional thoughts from John Engle, which

support the analysis of his transcriptions and encourage consideration of more perspectives on transcription and old-time fiddling in general.

### *Personal Background*

I am a participant in contemporary old-time music circles, and have arrived at this project as a result of my own musical, academic, and personal trajectory. I grew up in Anchorage, Alaska in a thriving, diverse music community. This community included many people who had moved there from elsewhere, often bringing their music with them, and I was brought up in an era of newfound access to “other” knowledge bases through online forums, journals, and music-sharing sites. The relationship between place, identity, and music has always been deeply compelling to me, and as I traveled and lived in other parts of the country, I grew increasingly interested in how music—and the ideology it carries—shifts over time and space. As a touring musician, I often am forced to contextualize my own and others’ music to new audiences. This has encouraged me to reflect on the way people communicate about music, and the forms of transmission relevant to its continuation.

Upon moving to Johnson City, TN in 2013, I felt a strong feeling of musical regionality that I had not encountered before. I spent a lot of time listening, watching, and musically exploring. I attended fiddlers conventions, observed the way students in the traditional music programs negotiated genre and identity politics, participated in square dances, got involved with regional music youth education efforts like Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM), met cherished “tradition bearers,” visited regional folk festivals and various other sites of cultural celebration, and gained greater grounding through the lens of the Department of Appalachian Studies at East Tennessee State University.

As my regional awareness grew, I learned more about the old-time musicians in the area, including John Engle, who was described to me as a specialist in the fiddling of Tommy Jarrell. I first met Engle in 2018 when he visited East Tennessee State University and led a workshop in the Bluegrass, Old-Time, Country, and Celtic Music Studies Program. I had never heard anyone speak about old-time fiddling the way Engle did. He talked about the visceral experience of fiddling, especially bowing, and emphasized how connecting with the rhythms of fiddlers like Tommy Jarrell (not the notes, those are secondary) *feels* good and right. Engle mentioned that he had developed his own system for notating bowings and rhythms, and I was intrigued.

As a music educator with experience in differing pedagogical worlds, I knew that standard western notation was not always well suited to the task of communicating a tune, particularly old-time tunes that felt more defined by their style than their melodies. This led to my growing interest in the ways that others have approached the task of teaching and learning old-time music, especially through the use of transcription.

### *“Old-Time Music”*

Because transcription has played an important role in Appalachia and particularly in the history of old-time music, it is important to contextualize my use of the term “old-time” and its relationship to the shaping of sentiments toward Appalachia. I elected to use the term “old-time music” in this project for a number of reasons, including its relevance today. Many musicians describe their music as old-time, and belong to larger communities of old-time festival participants. There are workshops, seminars, camps, and university programs that utilize old-time music as a descriptor. “Old-time” tends to best reflect the sense of history that participants feel is central to the music they play. And while the modern music industry’s use of genres is everchanging and inconsistent, there exists a common understanding of the existence of a style

called old-time that overlaps with larger commercial genres like Americana, country, bluegrass, and roots.

Historically, according to author Archie Green, the term “old-time” was claimed by the music industry to refer to recordings of early country musicians.<sup>3</sup> It was also used to refer to southern mountain music by music preservationists.<sup>4</sup> Its origins lie with the sounds of the voice, fiddle, and banjo and later addition of instruments like guitar and sometimes other instruments like mandolins, autoharps, harmonicas, or piano.<sup>5</sup> Old-time encompasses a range of musics including dance music, ballads (including those learned from broadsides), minstrel songs, play party songs, Anglo-Celtic fiddle tunes, Victorian parlor songs, and sacred songs. It refers to music played for personal, family, or community entertainment primarily in rural areas and prevalent nationally throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Old-time music has a historical relationship with dance, where fiddlers and dancers would accompany one another (buck dancing, clogging, flat footing, social dancing, square dancing).

Old-time music is widely understood to have its roots most strongly in the rural south and in southern Appalachia especially, according to country music scholar Bill Malone, and the term “old-time” maintains a strong affiliation with Southern Appalachia in the popular imagination.<sup>67</sup> Shaunna Scott, Phillip Obermiller, and Chad Berry in their essays for *Studying Appalachian Studies: Making the Path by Walking*, explain how while the definition of “Appalachia” shifts, its boundaries arbitrary and porous, the term generally refers to the American region that

<sup>3</sup> Archie Green, “Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol,” *Journal of American Folklore* 78 (1965).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 164.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce H. Cauthen, *With Fiddle and Well-Rosined Bow* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989); Steven Harvey, *Bound for Shady Grove* (Austin: University of Georgia Press, 2000); Turino, *Music as Social Life*.

<sup>6</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Southern Music American Music* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Some argue this geographic relationship is overstated due to the greater success of commercialized old-time music in the south. Simon Bronner argues for the roots of old-time being of rural America more generally, and firmly traceable to immigrants from the British Isles.

encompasses the Allegheny Mountains, Blue Ridge Mountains, Smoky Mountains, Cumberland Plateau, the people who live in these hills and valleys, and extends to the millions of people who migrated from the region but share its heritage.<sup>8</sup> Southern Appalachia was among the earliest areas in the United States to be identified as a distinctive geographic region. To late nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars, part of its distinctiveness was due to the region's isolation from the rest of the country, a geographic inaccessibility that reinforced a cultural trait of individualism and otherness, as supported by the works of John C. Campbell.<sup>9</sup> The othering of southern Appalachia was reflected in national sentiments toward music, and record companies established early connections between old-time music and rural/rustic imagery beginning in the 1920s. According to David Whisnant (1983) and folklorist Richard Blaustein (1975), old-time music implied a more "bucolic past." Along with local color writers, early field recorders also promoted the misconception that Appalachian people were white, anglo-saxon, and protestant, and the availability of old-time recordings and transcriptions today still demonstrates an overall lack of representation. In Chapter 2, I continue this conversation on the intersection of Appalachia, old-time music, and transcription, after a survey of literature from the field of ethnomusicology regarding the concept of transcription, its many purposes, and its limitations.

### *Relevance and Implications*

This thesis presents a comparative analysis of transcriptions, and while there have been other side-by-side studies, no studies have addressed the topic of old-time music. Because transcription has long played a role in old-time music, it is worth considering the variety of

<sup>8</sup> Shaunna L. Scott, Phillip J. Obermiller, and Chad Berry, "Making Appalachia: Interdisciplinary Fields and Appalachian Studies," in *Studying Appalachian Studies: Making the Path by Walking*, ed. Chad Berry, Phillip J. Obermiller, and Shaunna L. Scott (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 16; Shaunna L. Scott, Phillip J. Obermiller, and Chad Berry, *Studying Appalachian Studies: Making the Path by Walking* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 28.

<sup>9</sup> John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (The Russell Sage Foundation, 1921).

methods and their implications. I feature three distinct approaches that have never been in dialogue with one another—a published work, a soon-to-be published work, and a work not intended to be published at all. Together they further conversations about the possibilities and limitations of transcription, and provide insight into the underlying intentions of transcriptions. This analysis is useful for the fields of ethnomusicology and old-time music, and could have implications for future old-time fiddle tune transcription processes and especially their application in educational settings.

These findings invite continued exploration of the broader relationship between transcription and musical traditions, and make room for additional musicological analysis of themes such as harmony and chords. This project invites further examination of which tunes are and are not chosen to be transcribed in the first place and why; the influence of transcription on the old-time music tradition and community; how transcriptions influence a listener's experience with a recording; and the impact of technological change on the transcription process and outcome.



## CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to address the question of what these transcriptions of old-time fiddle tunes can tell a reader, I ask what transcription is and how it relates to old-time music. In this chapter, I explore the concept of transcription as it has been discussed and implemented in the field of ethnomusicology, including the many underlying purposes and limitations of transcription that scholars have identified. Among the most significant delineations of “purpose” is Charles Seeger’s concept of “prescriptive” versus “descriptive” transcription, where prescriptive transcriptions are those written to be performed, and descriptive transcriptions are those meant to be analyzed.<sup>10</sup> To support the concept of transcription as an inherent reduction of information, I also explore what the literature identifies as key limitations of transcription and historical approaches to addressing them including the use of technology.

Transcription has long played a significant role in old-time music, established by national interest in and “othering” of Appalachia in the nineteenth century. Because of old-time music’s connection with southern Appalachia and various misconceptions about the region, it is important to dive intentionally into what “old-time” means, and the significance of field recorders, collectors, commercial music, and folk revivalists in documenting and shaping understanding of the music and its supposed homeplace. Furthermore, the transcriptions I analyze in this project are not the only examples of transcribing old-time fiddle tunes, so this chapter also provides a survey of other academic and popular old-time tunebooks.

### *On Transcription*

Bruno Nettl in his book *The Study of Ethnomusicology* articulates the most common interpretation of transcription within the literature of ethnomusicology as “the reduction of

<sup>10</sup> Charles Seeger, “Prescriptive and Descriptive Music Writing,” *MQ* 44 (1958): 184–195.

recorded sound to standard Western music notation.”<sup>11</sup> While this thesis includes examples of just that—transcribers interpreting sounds from recordings and communicating what they hear in standard western notation—my interpretation of transcription also leaves room for transcribers working from live performance or memory rather than from recordings, alternative systems of notation, and adaptations of standard western music notation that attempt to better represent non-standard sounds. Because of that, and to better destabilize the primacy of western music within the field of ethnomusicology, I simply interpret transcription as the reduction of sound to visual form. Transcription represents a “reduction” because of the inherent differences between sound and visual information (one cannot possibly capture the nuance of the other).

Transcription is a subcategory of notation; as described by Ter Ellingson for *Grove Music Online*, whereas notation is a visual analogue of musical sound, transcription refers to both the act and the outcome, and indicates that the music is written down from a live or recorded performance.<sup>12</sup> Ellingson and Doris Stockman articulate how transcription intersects with similar concepts like analysis of music or the description of music, and is a means of musical transmission.<sup>13</sup> Musical transmission refers to any communication of musical materials from one person to another—in oral, aural, or written forms—regardless of time depth of what is transmitted.<sup>14</sup> There are multiple subcategories of transmission, including: oral transmission (by mouth, words, spoken instruction), aural transmission (learning by ear, memory, performance; what is understood to be the primary form of transmission for old-time music), media

<sup>11</sup> Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 2nd ed. (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 75.

<sup>12</sup> Ter Ellingson, “Transcription (I),” *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.28268>.

<sup>13</sup> Doris Stockmann, “Die Transkription in Der Musikethnologie: Geschichte, Probleme, Methoden,” *Acta Musicologica* 51 (1979): 204–245; Ter Ellingson, “Transcription,” in *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction*, ed. Helen Myers, 1992, 110–152.

<sup>14</sup> Kay Shelemay, “The Ethnomusicologist and the Transmission of Tradition,” *Journal of Musicology* 14, no. 1 (1996): 35.

transmission (oral and written via recordings, television, radio, internet), and written transmission. Written transmission is the learning of music using a form of notation or transcription. As put by Timothy Rice on his section on “Transmission” for *Grove Music Online*, written transmission fixes music and allows it to move across space and time.<sup>15</sup>

### *Purposes of Transcription*

Scholars have asserted many different purposes for transcriptions. Nettl has identified a key purpose as providing hard evidence of the existence of a certain type of music.<sup>16</sup> One transcriber (working before the advent of recorded sound), Stumpf, approached transcribing as a way of presenting and describing information but not theorizing about it. Hopkins in her article “The Purposes of Transcription,” acknowledged how a transcription is a record of a particular performance and not how to play the music. He found that a transcriber’s perspective impacted how the music was written down, and that one purpose of transcriptions was to facilitate comparison.<sup>17</sup>

Transcriptions can also reveal facets of non-written transmission and change over time. For example, Knauff’s (1839) four pamphlets of reels for the piano (which also represented a large selection of old-time fiddle tunes) is thought to reference the playing of local fiddlers at the time who participated largely in oral and aural transmission.<sup>18</sup> Goertzen’s (2004) transcriptions of tunes as played by a Mississippi fiddler George Cecil McLeod were used to compare to other versions in an effort to trace possible sources.<sup>19</sup> And Quigley (1993) transcribed tunes and

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Rice, “Transmission,” *Grove Music Online*.

<sup>16</sup> Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> Pandora Hopkins, “The Purposes of Transcription,” *EM* 10 (1966): 214–216.

<sup>18</sup> Chris Goertzen and Alan Jabbour, “George P. Knauff’s Virginia Reels and Fiddlings in the Atebellum South,” *American Music* 5, no. 2 (1987): 121–144.

<sup>19</sup> Chris Goertzen, “George Cecil McLeod, Mississippi’s Fiddling Senator, and the Modern History of American Fiddling,” *American Music* 22, no. 3 (2004): 339–379.

variations from a French Newfoundland fiddler in order to observe changes over time and compositional processes.<sup>20</sup> Transcription makes oral and aural transmission partially visible to researchers.

By looking at the ways in which fieldworkers are implicated in the process of transmission, one can also better see the fundamental purposes of transcription. Shelemay proposed three common purposes of transcription which “begin at moments when the study of a tradition becomes part of the life of the tradition itself and relationships in the field deepen to a more interactional model.”<sup>21</sup> In the case of old-time fiddle tune transcription, the production of transcriptions has indeed become a part of the life of the tradition itself, and Shelemay’s guiding categories feel true to the guiding values of many old-time tune transcribers:

- Preservation. “It seems clear that the very process of studying any musical tradition is tantamount to participating in an act of preservation,” Shelemay explains.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes this role as preserver of tradition is recognized or desired by people within the tradition, as demonstrated by Barbara Smith in her article “Variability, Change, and the Learning of Music.”<sup>23</sup> Shelemay points to the ways preservation can mean acknowledging the realities of musical change and may involve an implicit contract between the ethnomusicologist and the tradition bearers. “This contract may be particularly crucial in the case of ‘insider’ research, when the scholar shares, entirely or in part, the identity of the tradition’s carriers.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> C Quigley, “Catching Rhymes: Generative Musical Processes in the Compositions of a French Newfoundland Fiddler,” *Ethnomusicology* 37, no. 2 (1993): 155–200.

<sup>21</sup> Shelemay, “The Ethnomusicologist and the Transmission of Tradition,” 46.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Barnard Smith, “Variability, Change, and the Learning of Music,” *Ethnomusicology* 31 (1987).

<sup>24</sup> Shelemay, “The Ethnomusicologist and the Transmission of Tradition,” 47.

- Memorialization. This acknowledges the idiosyncratic and highly personal nature of transmission, and Shelemay provides supporting examples of ethnomusicologists who write odes to teachers or informants.
- Mediation. Alan Lomax described himself not as a “reviver so much as a stander-in-between,” seeking to “find the best folk singers...and get them heard everywhere.”<sup>25</sup> “That’s right,” Beth Lomax Hawes said in her comments at a 1981 Folk Arts Panel meeting, “we’re meddlers!”<sup>26</sup> Mediation places field recorders and transcribers in an intermediary zone between community members and outsiders, but it can also look like raising awareness of the tradition within the community itself. Shelemay’s public lecture on the Syrian-Jewish musical tradition to an audience of majority Syrian Jews is one such example.<sup>27</sup>

The clearest and most influential way of describing the purpose of transcription came from Charles Seeger who introduced terms for two kinds of transcription: prescriptive and descriptive:<sup>28</sup>

- Descriptive. Descriptive transcriptions are those meant to be analyzed. They aim to provide a thorough and objective account of what happened in a particular musical performance, “presumably without making (or accepting) judgements as to the relative significance of events and units.”<sup>29</sup> Bartók’s transcriptions of European folk songs were famously descriptive; they were incredibly detailed and, as a result, difficult to interpret.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Sheehy, “A Few Notions about Philosophy and Strategy in Ethnomusicology,” *Ethnomusicology* 36, no. 3 (1992): 329.

<sup>26</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, “Music, the Public Interest, and the Practice of Ethnomusicology,” *Ethnomusicology* 36 (1992): 316.

<sup>27</sup> Shelemay, “The Ethnomusicologist and the Transmission of Tradition,” 49.

<sup>28</sup> Seeger, “Prescriptive and Descriptive Music Writing,” 184.

<sup>29</sup> Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 79.

No descriptive transcription can capture every bit of information about music; Bartók's were incomplete because he did not have symbols to represent certain aspects of singing style.

- Prescriptive. Prescriptive transcriptions are those written to be performed. By contrast, prescriptive transcriptions typically include only what is needed by a "cultural insider" in order to perform the music. For example, to learn a new mazurka by Chopin, "a pianist reads his or her notes with an aural knowledge of how Chopin is supposed to sound," Nettl explains.<sup>30</sup> However, regardless of the intent of the transcription, it gives readers "an accurate idea of the specific sound of a song only if they already know in general the kind of sound to be expected, if they are already acquainted with the style. Otherwise, it serves only as a vehicle for abstract perception of style characteristics."<sup>31</sup>

In the case of the transcription of old-time fiddle tunes, particularly in the contemporary examples that are the focus of this paper, they could easily be said to have both descriptive and prescriptive functions. They provide a knowledgeable player with a framework to use in conjunction with their existing stylistic knowledge, and represent certain intricacies of a particular performance for readers to analyze. Nettl confirms that "depending, of course, on their context, many transcriptions equally serve prescriptive and descriptive purposes."<sup>32</sup>

Nettl further breaks down the concept of descriptive transcription into at least three types: 1) one which offers the details of a single performance, 2) another that gives the essence of a piece, 3) and a third which gives what a culture would consider an ideal performance.<sup>33</sup> These subcategories of descriptive transcription, particularly the first two, best represent the approach

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 81.

of most old-time tune transcribers. Distinctions like prescriptive/descriptive, or preservation/memorialization/mediation, even if not an either/or situation, are helpful in examining the underlying values of a particular transcription. “Two different transcriptions of the same piece do not simply indicate varying competence but also differences in the purpose of the task at hand, in the conception of what constitutes a piece of music.”<sup>34</sup> Investigating underlying purposes is what this thesis aims to do, by comparing three differing transcription approaches.

### *Limitations of Transcription*

The task of transcribing is not a simple one, and scholars have long extolled the challenge and limitations of transcription. Jaap Kunst in his 1959 edition of *Ethnomusicology* states, “the transcription of exotic phonograms is one of the most difficult and intricate tasks which ethnomusicological research has ever put before its devotees.”<sup>35</sup> This intricacy has led to unending reexamination and efforts made to improve upon previous transcription techniques.<sup>36</sup> Bartók in his publication *Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs* insists “we should never tire of improving and changing our methods of work in order to accomplish this task as well as humanly possible.”<sup>37</sup> Alan Merriam questions the assumption that an ethnomusicologist “has available to him accurate methods of transcribing music sound to paper,” in stating, “this is a question that is far from resolved.”<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, the literature is far from resolved on even the possibility of achieving proficient transcription, because of the inherent difference between visual and aural information; Nettl says, “concerned with a study of music that lives largely in oral tradition, ethnomusicologists have

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>35</sup> Jaap Kunst, *Ethnomusicology*, 3rd ed. (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1959), 57.

<sup>36</sup> Mantle Hood, *The Ethnomusicologist* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971); Ellingson, “Transcription.”

<sup>37</sup> Béla Bartók and Albert Lord, *Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 37.

<sup>38</sup> Alan Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 57.

spent a great deal of their energy finding ways of reducing it to visual form.”<sup>39</sup> And, “given that in all societies music is created and transmitted--entirely or to a large degree--aurally, the culture of Western classical music seems to represent a serious departure from the norm.”<sup>40</sup> Charles Seeger stated, “a hazard of writing music lies in an assumption that the full auditory parameter of music is or can be represented by a partial visual parameter.”<sup>41</sup> “No musical script can ever be a faithful mirror of music,” added Curt Sachs in *The Wellsprings of Music*.<sup>42</sup> In Roxanne McCollester’s study of transcription techniques, she agrees with Zygmunt Estreicher when he affirms that “the ideal goal of a musical transcription then cannot be realized because it seeks to find a visual equivalent to an oral phenomenon.”<sup>43</sup>

Some have looked to technology for ways of addressing the inherent limitations of transcription. Technology has long intersected with developments in music transcription, arguably beginning with the earliest recordings, mechanical instruments, and piano rolls used to operate player pianos.<sup>44</sup> Ethnomusicologists point to Milton Metfessel’s 1928 phonophotography work as launching new enthusiasm for mechanical transcription. From Metfessel’s work through the 1950s, there was widespread fascination with the invention of automatic transcription tools.<sup>45</sup> In 1960, in reference to new use of melographic transcriptions, Seeger stated, “from now on, field collection and study of musics of whatever era... and of whatever idiom... cannot afford to ignore the means and methods of [melographic transcription]. Thus a new era of

<sup>39</sup> Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 75.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>41</sup> Seeger, “Prescriptive and Descriptive Music Writing,” 184.

<sup>42</sup> Curt Sachs, *The Wellsprings of Music* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1962).

<sup>43</sup> Roxane McCollester, “A Transcription Technique Used by Zygmunt Estreicher,” *EM* 4 (1960): 132.

<sup>44</sup> Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 86.

<sup>45</sup> Qia Shen, “FACING THE PREDICAMENT OF WORDLESSNESS: WHEN WE SPEAK OF CERTAIN MUSICAL SOUNDS,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 46 (2014): 32; Charles Seeger, “An Instantaneous Music Notator,” *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 3 (1951): 103–106; Milton Metfessel, *Phonophotography in Folk Music: American Negro Songs in New Notation* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1928).



ethnomusicology has been entered.”<sup>46</sup> It was thought that the use of melographic and other automatic transcription devices would parallel the growth of technology use in other aspects of life, and would make the work of the ethnomusicologist easier, more precise, and less biased.<sup>47</sup>

This new era never fully took off, however, and in fact the use of automated transcription technology in ethnomusicology encountered resistance in the form of arguments ranging from it requiring too much specialized training, to it providing too much information (as Kunst would say, “to a point where one cannot see the wood for the trees”), to the primacy of the human ear.<sup>48</sup>

Contrary to expectations that 21<sup>st</sup> century ethnomusicology would involve far greater use of automatic transcription, Nettle suggests that aural transcription is still prioritized.<sup>49</sup> That being said, for old-time musicians, certain technological tools such as variable speed controls (like the Amazing Slow Downer software, or YouTube’s built-in speed controls) and looping mechanisms are widely used in learning music and in the transcription process. According to Nettle, as recordings edged out transcription as the “principal permanent record of music,” transcription has instead thrived as a way to focus on specialized areas of music performance like identifying underlying rhythmic structures or melodic themes.<sup>50</sup> To accomplish this, ethnomusicologists have developed different transcription techniques including notation based on a culture’s own notation system, graph arrangements, or simplifications such as solmization.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Charles Seeger, “Review of New Methods in Vocal Folk Music Research by Carl Dahlback,” *EM* 4 (1960): 41–42.

<sup>47</sup> Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 87.

<sup>48</sup> *Notation of Folk Music: Recommendations of the Committee of Experts* (Geneva, 1952); Kunst, *Ethnomusicology*, 39; George Herzog, “Music at the Fifth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences,” *JIFMC* 9 (1957): 73; George List, “The Reliability of Transcription,” *EM* 18 (1974): 375–376; Nazir A Jairazbhoy, “The ‘Objective’ and Subjective View in Music Transcription,” *Ethnomusicology* 21, no. 2 (1977): 269, accessed December 16, 2019, <https://about.jstor.org/terms>.

<sup>49</sup> Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 90.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

Non-standard-western notation systems have been best represented in reference to those developed by or for Asian and African societies, as demonstrated by the research of William Malm, Walter Kaufmann, James Koetting, Hewitt Pantaleoni, Doris Green, and Nazir Jairazbhoy.<sup>52</sup> For example, to analyze nonmetric music (music in which rhythm and duration cannot adequately be represented by traditional note values—a dilemma some fiddle tune transcribers face), researchers like Hassan Habib Touma have used lines indicating lengths of notes within a framework of spaces representing seconds, and Koetting created graphs that distinguish drum strokes and sounds and time elapsed in between.<sup>53</sup> While western notation has been adopted by musical cultures all over the world and some academics like Richard Rastall have argued that it is “an all-purpose notation,” most seem to agree that western notation is, for better or worse, simply most prominent, a system that “is good for pitch, moderately good for prescribing rhythm, poor for much else” according to Nettl.<sup>54</sup>

Examples of amendments to western notation and use of non-western notation (like John Engle’s bowing transcription, as highlighted in Chapter 4) can help us question the limitations of thinking through the lens of standard western notation. “Musical hearing and cognition... may be

<sup>52</sup> William Malm, *Japanese Music and Musical Instruments* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1959); William Malm, “On the Nature and Function of Symbolism in Western and Oriental Music,” *Philosophy East and West* 19, no. 3 (1969): 235–246; Walter Kaufmann, *Musical Notations of the Orient* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967); Ter Ellingson, “Notation,” in *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction*, ed. Helen Myers, 1992, 153–164; James Koetting, *Analysis and Notation of West African Drum Ensemble Music*, *UCLA Selected Reports*, vol. 1, 1970; Hewitt Pantaleoni, “The Rhythm of Atsia Dance Drumming Among the Anlo (Ewe) of Anyako” (Wesleyan University, 1972); Hewitt Pantaleoni, “Three Principles of Timing in Anlo Dance Drumming,” *African Music* 5, no. 2 (1972): 50–63; Hewitt Pantaleoni, “Toward Understanding the Play of Sogo in Atsia,” *Ethnomusicology* 16, no. 1 (1972): 1–37; Doris Greene, “Percussion Notation,” *Dance Notation Journal* 1, no. 3 (1983): 7–49; Jairazbhoy, “The ‘Objective’ and Subjective View in Music Transcription.”

<sup>53</sup> Hassan Habib Touma, *Die Musik Der Araber* (Amadeus Press, 1996); Koetting, *Analysis and Notation of West African Drum Ensemble Music*, vol. 1, p. .

<sup>54</sup> Richard Rastall, *The Notation of Western Music* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1983), 6; Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts*.

profoundly affected by the characteristics of Western notation,” Nettl reminds us, just as “thought is regulated by the structure of language.”<sup>55</sup>

Another way of revealing limitations or differences is by placing transcriptions in direct comparison, as this thesis does. This research is aligned with other comparative transcription works that have placed multiple transcriptions of similar or identical sounds in contrast to one another. Some notable early instances include work by Franz Boas in the late nineteenth century on Inuit linguistic transcriptions and the subjectivity of European fieldworkers, a 1969 Japan project by Fumio Koizumi, a 1981 French study by Gilbert Rouget, and a 1963 symposium hosted by the Society for Ethnomusicology.<sup>56</sup> At the 1963 symposium, Scholars Robert Garfias, Mieczyslaw Kolinski, George List, and Willard Rhodes were asked to transcribe the same piece of music (a Hukwe Bushman song with musical bow) and compare the results. Just as that symposium was intended to non-competitively shed light on the transcription processes and outcomes, so I approach my study.

The four transcriptions yielded at the 1963 symposium demonstrated a range of approaches to transcribing the same recording, including two similarly descriptive styles that presented more information perhaps aimed at a reader accustomed to western notation who could get a more thorough understanding of the total sound, and two styles that assumed a reader could fill in some undocumented fundamentals of the performance. Furthermore, one transcriber, Robert Garfias, used the lines of the staff in a non-standard-western fashion, and used lines instead of notes to visualize some sounds. The concept of the articulated note works better for

<sup>55</sup> Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 88.

<sup>56</sup> Franz Boas, “On Alternating Sounds,” *American Anthropologist* 2, no. 1 (1889); Fumio Koizumi, Meiken Kuriyama, and Bukkyō Seinenkai. *Shingonshū Buzan-ha, Shingi-Shingon Shomyo Shusei/Buddhist Chant of Shingi-Shingon* (Tokyo: Youth Association of the Buzan Branch of the Shingon Sect, 1999); Gilbert Rouget, *Ethnomusicologie et Représentations de La Musique*, ed. Gilbert Rouget (Paris, 1981).

some musics than others, and in some cases lines may allow for better demonstration of things like slides or ornamentation. Garfias and others remind us that aural transcription does not have to depend solely on western notation, and further that if we “recognize notes as abstractions, the door is open for using other and often more appropriate abstractions as well.”<sup>57</sup>

This open door has led to the creation of all kinds of transcriptional alternatives, including conceptual transcriptions (graphic-acoustic embodiments of a musical system), solfège notation (Kara 1970), vocal tone accents (Ellingson 1979), multidimensional composites (Wade), circular depictions of rhythmic cycles (Becker 1981), and spiral notation of structural development (Lortat-Jacob 1981).<sup>58</sup> Ethnomusicologists including James Reid (1977) have proposed amending standard western notation, for example by using equidistant pitch lines spaced according to intervals or equidistant time spacing.<sup>59</sup> The three transcription approaches presented in Chapter 4 present amendments to standard western notation, as well as an alternative transcription method that is centered around rhythm and movement rather than melodic content.

In comparing these three transcription approaches, I question how differing approaches to transcribing the same old-time fiddle tunes reflect the intentions of the transcriber, and how different information is presented and prioritized through transcription. One type of information that transcription always succeeds at presenting is the underlying values of the transcriber. As Nettl said, “a type of notation must select from the acoustic phenomena those which the notator

<sup>57</sup> Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 85.

<sup>58</sup> G Kara, *Chants d'un Barde Mongol* (Budapest, 1970); Ter Ellingson, “The Mandala of Sound: Concepts and Sound Structures in Tibetan Ritual Music” (University of Wisconsin, 1979); Bonnie C Wade, *Khyal: Creativity within North India's Classical Music Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Judith Becker and Alton Becker, “A Musical Icon: Power and Meaning in Javanese Gamelan Music,” in *The Sign in Music and Literature*, ed. W Steiner (Austin, 1981); B Lortat-Jacob, “Danse de Sardaigne: Composition Renouvellement,” in *Ethnomusicologie et Représentations de La Musique*, ed. Gilbert Rouget (Paris, 1981).

<sup>59</sup> James Reid, “Transcription in a New Mode,” *Ethnomusicology* 21 (1977): 415.

considers most essential.”<sup>60</sup> And Qia Shen, in his discussion of the displacement of Chinese words by western-derived terminology, says, “the description achieved through notation is itself actually a narrative about the musical sound.”<sup>61</sup>

Because the three focus transcriptions concern old-time music, they call upon specific expectations and understandings unique to that style of music. Given that old-time music is a distinct genre with a history that involves transcription in significant ways, and given that there has never been a comparative analysis of old-time transcriptions specifically, it is helpful to contextualize this study within the broader history of old-time music and transcription.

### *Old-Time Music and Transcription*

Country music scholar Charles Wolfe asserts that “for more than seventy-five years, scholars working for the Library of Congress, individuals associated with regional universities, hobbyists, amateur enthusiasts, and commercial companies have all sought to document the rich Appalachian musical heritage on sound recordings.”<sup>62</sup> These recordings number into the thousands and include location recordings made by record companies in the 1920s, cylinder recordings, mass-marketed commercial recordings, folklorists’ disc and tape recordings, and a large body of recordings contributed by members of the “folk music revival” in the mid-twentieth century. This body of recordings remains vital to the modern old-time music community, and tracing the history of documenting music of Southern Appalachia leads us to the production of old-time fiddle tune transcriptions.

<sup>60</sup> Bruno Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 98.

<sup>61</sup> Shen, “FACING THE PREDICAMENT OF WORDLESSNESS: WHEN WE SPEAK OF CERTAIN MUSICAL SOUNDS,” 26.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Wolfe, “Field Recording Sessions,” in *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, ed. Rudy Abramson and Jean Haskell (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 1153–1155.

### *Field Recorders in Southern Appalachia*

While some missionaries, local color writers, and other travelers wrote accounts of mountain music, it was not until the onset of the nation's rapid industrialization (which coincided with the rise of cities, "new" immigration, and other factors) that old-time music was deemed a resource worthy of preservation.<sup>63</sup> Through their collections of especially English and Irish ballads, Cecil Sharp, Arthur Kyle Davis, Bascom Lamar Lunsford, and Dorothy Scarborough all conveyed the idea that Southern Appalachia was home to the last keepers of a rapidly disappearing folk song tradition. Folklorists established a deep interest in the American ballad tradition, and the literature on ballad collecting is plentiful including works by Mellinger Edward Henry and Maurice Matteson, Arthur Kyle Davis, Lamar Lunsford and Lamar Stringfield, Louis Chappell, and Bobby McMillon and Daniel Patterson.<sup>64</sup> Collectors outside the academic world like John and Ruby Lomax and Charles Seeger were among the earliest of a small group of field collectors with an interest in old-time fiddle music. Other notable early field recordings and research include Samuel Bayard's 1944 study of Pennsylvania fiddle tunes and George Herzog's 1936 exploration of American folksong.

The vast majority of field recordings of old-time music were made by the following generation, sometimes literally, as with Alan Lomax and Mike Seeger. In the late 1950s, acknowledging the newfound relationship between middle-class Americans and traditional folk music, writers labeled a "folk music revival." A defining characteristic of revival-era pioneers

<sup>63</sup> Bill C. Malone, "Music," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 12: Music*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson and Bill C. Malone (University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>64</sup> Mellinger Edward Henry and Maurice Matteson, *Beech Mountain Folk Songs and Ballads* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1936); Mellinger Edward Henry and Maurice Matteson, *Folk Songs from the Southern Highlands* (New York: J.J. Augusten Publishers, 1938); Arthur Kyle Davis, *Traditional Ballads of Virginia* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1969); Lamar Lunsford and Lamar Stringfield, *30 & One Folk Songs* (New York: Carl Fischer, Inc., 1929); Louis Chappell, "Morgantown, West Virginia: The Ballad Press," 1939; Bobby McMillon and Daniel Patterson, *The Tree Accurst: Stories of Frankie Silver* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

like the New Lost City Ramblers was visiting with older source musicians, learning from them directly, recording their performances, documenting their music, and presenting and promoting these source musicians at festivals. This approach—“enacting person-to-person reciprocity,” as Jeff Todd Titon refers to it— signaled a shift toward understanding folk music as a living cultural tradition, a tradition that one could learn from the source and integrate into one’s life.<sup>65</sup>

An enduring value in one’s participation in old-time music is endeavoring to find the first recorded source of tunes. For first generation revivalists, this meant making their own field recordings of living masters of old-time fiddling. These revival-era field recordings best represent a generation of musicians who learned tunes from radio and from “masters” still performing at regional fiddle contests and community dances. For example, in the mid-1960s Alan Jabbour visited with and recorded Virginia fiddler Henry Reed, later publishing transcriptions of several tunes which can now be found through the Library of Congress along with more artifacts from Jabbour’s vast history of folkloric work. Here in Johnson City, Tennessee, in 1964, ETSU English professors Ambrose Manning and Thomas Burton began gathering folk songs and other folklore in East Tennessee and western North Carolina, later publishing two volumes of songs, coauthoring a weekly column on songs, and running the university’s Folk Festival from 1966-1972.<sup>66</sup> There is a rich body of literature on folk revivals, their impact, and related themes of authenticity and representation, including works from Ray

<sup>65</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, “Authenticity and Authentication: Mike Seeger, the New Lost City Ramblers, and the Old-Time Music Revival,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 49, no. 2 (2012): 233.

<sup>66</sup> Neil V. Rosenberg, *Transforming Traditions: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, ed. Neil Rosenberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, n.d.).

Allen (2010), Serge Denisoff (1971), Neil Rosenberg (1993), Malone (2011), Jeff Todd Titon (1993), Robert Cantwell (1996), Benjamin Filene (2000), and Michael Scully (2008).<sup>67</sup>

### *Purity and Homogeneity in Old-Time Music*

Despite revivalists' commitment to faithfulness in performance style, the historical urge to preserve old-time music overlaps with conflicting ideas about purity and authenticity. According to Malone, folklorists and enthusiasts sought to "preserve folk music before it succumbed to modern forces. They viewed such music as static and pure phenomenon, and as the product of a racially homogeneous, that is, Anglo-Saxon, culture."<sup>68</sup> It is important to remember that this music was never "pure." Many songs from Tin Pan Alley, published as sheet music and designed for upper-middle-class urban consumers, were folded into the southern folk canon, many still preserved by contemporary bluegrass and old-time musicians. "Folk culture was never isolated from the world at large," Malone reminds us.

Just as stereotypical images of southern Appalachia depict a homogenous region, musical representations have often failed to acknowledge the many distinct communities co-existing in the region. Who is left out? Perhaps the most significant example, Black fiddlers were by and large passed over in the peak days of field recording, possibly because African American folklore was understood to be spirituals and blues.<sup>69</sup> Among the scholarship on race and old-time

<sup>67</sup> Ray Allen, "Performing Dio's Legacy Mike Seeger and the Urban Folk Music Revival," in *Ruth Crawford Seeger's Worlds: Innovation and Tradition in Twentieth-Century American Music*, ed. Ray Allen and Ellie M. Hisama (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 224–251, accessed November 13, 2019, <https://about.jstor.org/terms>; Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Rosenberg, *Transforming Traditions: Folk Music Revivals Examined*; Jeff Todd Titon, "Reconstructing the Blues: Reflections on the 1960s Blues Revival," in *Transforming Tradition*, ed. Neil Rosenberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 220–240; Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Michael F. Scully, *The Never-Ending Revival: Rounder Records and the Folk Alliance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

<sup>68</sup> Malone, "Music," 9–10.

<sup>69</sup> Harry Bolick and Stephen T. Austin, *Mississippi Fiddle Tunes and Songs from the 1930s* (The University Press of Mississippi, 2015), ix.



music are works from Bruce Bastin, Norm Cohen, David Evans, William Ferris, Archie Green, Judith McCulloh, Bill Malone, Peter Narváez, Paul Oliver, Neil Rosenberg, Jeff Todd Titon, D.K. Wilgus, Charles K. Wolfe, and others.

### *Access to the Source*

Early folk music collectors were important precursors to the subsequent development of Appalachian studies, and the old-time music community continues to share Appalachian studies' value of local and regional knowledge.<sup>70</sup> In the post-revival era, there remains a fixation with getting close to the *source*. Tracing tunes to a source is a type of "currency" in the old-time community, as suggested by ethnomusicologist and musician Jeff Todd Titon.<sup>71</sup> Accessibility of field recordings to the public has democratized the process, to some extent, particularly thanks to record labels like County, Rounder, RCA Vintage, and Folkways reissuing recordings on LPs. More recently, there has been a seeming explosion of digital archives that give people access to not just sound recordings, but also images, field notes, manuscripts, and transcriptions. The works of field collectors like Alan Jabbour, Bruce Greene, John Harrod, and Peter Hooker are housed in the archives of the Library of Congress, Digital Library of Appalachia, Berea College, the University of North Carolina, and others. Additionally, online sites like SlipperyHill and the streamable content provided by the Field Recorders Collective provide free access to many non-commercial field recordings. Major online music streaming services like Apple Music and Spotify offer a growing representation of old-time recordings, as does YouTube.

A younger generation of old-time musicians (many with classical training) have sweeping access to digital recordings of so-called "tradition bearers" and "source musicians." This makes local/regional knowledge simultaneously less relevant (as geographic boundaries of

<sup>70</sup> Scott, Obermiller, and Berry, "Making Appalachia: Interdisciplinary Fields and Appalachian Studies," 26.

<sup>71</sup> Titon, *Old-Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes*, 11.

the music become even more imagined than before) and arguably more fetishized (the greater the distance from the source—in time and/or space—the more value is placed upon it).

Recordings—and transcriptions—can now be used both as a source for repertoire and a standard with which to judge contemporary performances: “some musicians also consider detailed rendering of the tunes to be important signs of competence and insider status,” Turino states.<sup>72</sup> Joseph Decosimo says that “source musician” is a term “used by Old-Time enthusiasts to make claims of authenticity and esoteric knowledge.”<sup>73</sup> Terms like “tradition bearers” and “source musicians” are still widely used, and they reveal the insular tendencies of some old-time communities, and a failure to acknowledge the breadth of many musicians’ influences, repertoires, and motivations.

It is worth noting that there also exists a population of old-time musicians who have grown up immersed in the old-time festival scene, and who listen and learn from contemporaries in those settings. Old-time festival culture, while not the subject of this paper, is a significant player in the form and function of the contemporary old-time community. Among other features, these participatory settings are host to a class of modern field recorders, who seem to prioritize amassing recordings of the old-time community’s elite musicians for personal use or sharing. The quest for the “undiscovered” is alive and well in today’s old-time music community.

#### *Academic and Popular Old-Time Tunebooks*

With greater exposure and access to many styles of music, there is a growing market for information and notation of many styles of music. Goertzen remarks how “the study of American fiddling is a curious branch of musicology and of folklore, with most contributions coming from

<sup>72</sup> Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 182.

<sup>73</sup> Joseph Decosimo, “Unexpected Vibrations in Unexpected Places: Making New, Old Music in the McCarroll Family” (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2012), 36-39.

dedicated amateurs after hours spent in careful study and who perform the music avidly.”<sup>74</sup> It is true that there is no vast body of academic writing on old-time music, which is surprising given the vitality of fiddling as a musical tradition in the United States. There is, however, a wealth of “popular” tunebooks targeted primarily at musicians wanting to add to their repertoire. And there are some tunebooks that also provide academic context; notable examples include Samuel Bayard’s (1982) *Dance to the Fiddle, March to the Fife*, which provides transcriptions and histories of western Pennsylvanian fiddle tunes; Jeff Todd Titon’s (2001) *Old-Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes*, which in addition to nearly 200 tune transcriptions with source information and new stylistic context, provides a valuable academic discussion of old-time fiddling; and Harry Bolick and Stephen T. Austin’s (2015) *Mississippi Fiddle Tunes and Songs from the 1930s* which revisits the work of 1936 Works Progress Administration (WPA) field collectors in addition to introducing transcriptions from other Mississippi field recordings. Seeing as there has yet to be a “satisfying, book-length treatment of fiddling in North America that would portray its complex historical development overall” according to Titon, regionally-focused works like those from Bayard, Titon, Bolick, and Austin are especially valuable.<sup>75</sup>

But the vast majority of literature devoted to old-time music has been generated not from within the academic realms of folklore or ethnomusicology, but from devoted students, players, teachers, and other members of the old-time community. Throughout this paper I refer to these people as specialists or participants (the literature makes use of these terms and others including enthusiasts, practitioners, or activists), terminology I address more in depth in Chapter 3. The tunebooks generated by these authors are in part geared toward those just approaching the style, people who might not be comfortable learning aurally. They also give current old-time musicians

<sup>74</sup> Chris Goertzen, “Review: FIDDLE TUNES,” *Notes* 68, no. 2 (2011): 442.

<sup>75</sup> Titon, *Old-Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes*, 12.

an opportunity to expand their repertoire if they read music notation, or provide more detailed source information to musicians and old-time enthusiasts.

Of the many “popular” old-time tunebooks that have been published, one significant example is Marion Thede’s (1970) *The Fiddle Book*. Thede was one of the early researchers of fiddle music, and she began recording and transcribing in the late 1920s. Thede’s selection of 160 tunes represents mostly Arkansas and Oklahoma, and she organized them thematically by tune title (place names, Oklahoma-themed, nature-based). Her approach to transcription could be said to be one of maximalism, à la Bartók; she articulates melodic information, embellishments, bowings, accents, string tuning information, tempos with metronomic markings, and song structures like higher or lower parts (she calls them “fine” and “course” parts). This approach leaves little guesswork for tune learners thanks to its specificity. Thede also includes brief historical facts related to some tunes, in addition to lyrics for those that involved singing. Her work was remarkable in its aim to identify themes in old-time fiddling. Thede’s work also set a precedent for a kind of old-time fiddle tune transcribing that we see echoed in the examples analyzed in Chapter 4.

Like Bartók’s, the transcriptions in Thede’s *The Fiddle Book* could be said to be in line with Charles Seeger’s notion of descriptive transcription, as it provides the details of a particular performance and makes an effort to present the information analytically. In the chapters that follow, I analyze three distinct transcription approaches and ground them in the context laid out in this review of literature. Chapter 5 uses the musicological analysis from Chapter 4 to identify the underlying intentions of the transcribers, calling on the many purposes identified by ethnomusicologists throughout time. In addition to the concept of prescriptive and descriptive transcription, Chapter 2 provided Nettl’s additional subcategories of descriptive transcription

including one that offers the details of a single performance, another that gives the essence of a piece, and a third that gives what a culture would consider an ideal performance.<sup>76</sup> Shelemay also provided three purposes from the perspective of transmission, where a fieldworker might produce a transcription that serves as an act of preservation, memorialization, or mediation. Distinctions like these are helpful lenses through which to consider transcriptions, even when the reality might be that a transcription serves multiple purposes.

Building on the research surveyed in this chapter, this thesis provides a comparative analysis of specific transcriptions, which is one method scholars have used to reveal limitations or differences. A notable example is the 1963 Society for Ethnomusicology symposium which hosted a comparison of four transcriptions of the same recording created by four different transcribers. While there have been other examples of side-by-side comparison, there has been no such study of transcription within the realm of old-time music. A thorough analysis of contrasting approaches to old-time fiddle tune transcriptions is useful for the fields of ethnomusicology and old-time music because in revealing key points of difference, it uncovers the range of information that a transcription can and cannot represent and provides insight into the underlying intentions of the transcriber. These findings contribute to the research on old-time fiddle tune transcription processes, and invite further exploration of the broader relationship between transcription and old-time music as well as other living traditions.

<sup>76</sup> Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 81.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODS

In this thesis I compare three different transcriptions of one old-time fiddle tune, Tommy Jarrell's rendition of "Devil in the Strawstack," in an effort to understand the range of information transcriptions can or cannot provide, how that information is prioritized, and what this might indicate about the purpose of these transcriptions. Each transcription was done by a different transcriber: the first comes from Clare Milliner and Walt Koken's 2011 book, *The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes* (MKC); the second comes from an unpublished manuscript by Roy Andrade, Drew Beisswenger, and Scott Prouty, as of March 2020 titled *Appalachian Fiddle Tunes* (AFT); and the third example comes from musician John Engle, who specializes in the study and performance of Tommy Jarrell's repertoire and style, particularly through the lens of right arm/bowing technique. In this chapter, I outline my methodological framework: the assumptions that guide my research, the research process itself, and the categories used for musicological analysis.

### *Guiding Assumptions*

One assumption that underscores my research is that the transcription of a tune is not the same as the performance of a tune. Old-time tune transcribers seek to document important information about the performance of a tune, but always acknowledge that the transcription is only a place to start in understanding the tune aurally or performing it oneself. As mentioned in Chapter 2, there is a fundamental difference between information one hears and information one writes. We see this well-explored by scholars like Charles Seeger ("a hazard of writing music lies in an assumption that the full auditory parameter of music is or can be represented by a partial visual parameter"<sup>77</sup>), Sachs ("no musical script can ever be a faithful mirror of music"<sup>78</sup>),

<sup>77</sup> Seeger, "Prescriptive and Descriptive Music Writing," 184.

<sup>78</sup> Sachs, *The Wellsprings of Music*.

and Estreicher (“the ideal goal of a musical transcription then cannot be realized because it seeks to find a visual equivalent to an oral phenomenon”<sup>79</sup>). This discrepancy between oral/aural and visual phenomena opens up questions about how one chooses to prioritize information. In the effort to “find a visual equivalent,” each of the transcribers I focus on has arrived somewhere different, despite starting from the same recorded performance.

Throughout my analysis, I do not make claims of more or less accuracy in the transcriptions, as each transcription represents its own approach to documenting recorded sound. Speaking on the politics of ethnography, James Clifford states:

“all constructed truths are made possible by powerful ‘lies’ of exclusion and rhetoric. Even the best ethnographic texts—serious, true fictions—are systems, or economies, of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control. Ethnographic truths are thus inherently *partial*—committed and incomplete.”<sup>80</sup>

Clifford reminds us that there will always be more to the story, more than one speaker could offer. Everything is an economy/system of truth. I carry this assumption through my research, and in my experience most transcribers seem to know this as well. Multiple transcriptions of the same tunes exist precisely because of this idea of dialogic truth. Often transcriptions are in part intended to launch a reader into engaging more deeply with the tune, by consulting other representations of it through source recordings, hearing how others play it, playing it oneself, or perhaps consulting other transcriptions. One author’s interpretation of a tune can be a solid place to start, committed and incomplete.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the majority of literature devoted to old-time music has been generated not from within the academic realms of folklore or ethnomusicology, but from devoted students, players, teachers, and other members of the old-time community. Throughout this paper

<sup>79</sup> McColleston, “A Transcription Technique Used by Zygmunt Estreicher,” 132.

<sup>80</sup> James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 7.

I refer to these people as specialists or participants. This best reflects my understanding of assumptions within the old-time community that those who study the music tend to also play the music, that teachers continue to be students, and that a clear hierarchy of virtuosity or accomplishment can be disrupted by expectations of regional style, interpersonal relationships, closeness to sources, and differing opinions on the commercialization of the music. These assumptions and deeper exploration of the norms and nuances of the old-time music community are supported by the work of academics like Joseph Decosimo, Richard Jones-Bamman, Richard Blaustein, David Wood, and Amy Suzanne Wooley.<sup>81</sup>

I borrow the term “specialist” from Neil Rosenberg who explores various roles people play in his discussion of folk revivals. While he focuses on the meaning and impact of revival, his delineation provides helpful grounding for the way I interpret my transcription sources:

“Revisionist perspectives are communicated to specialists who previously took their system for granted and may even have expected it to become moribund. Those specialists who accept the revivalists help them transform the community’s vision of the tradition. New specialists, whether they are tourists or the children of old masters, begin to include aspects of the revival perspective in their perception of the tradition. Eventually the revivalists who remain involved become specialists, and ultimately some may be accepted as old masters. Those specialists and revivalists who remain are the new activists. They combine a revival zeal with the specialists’ sense of community.”<sup>82</sup>

While I do not endeavor specifically to classify transcribers into one or more of the many roles Rosenberg lays out, I do think it is important to acknowledge that the very concept of tradition is often the product of negotiation and change, and that the many contributions to the pool of old-

<sup>81</sup> Joseph Decosimo, “Catching the ‘Wild Note’: Listening, Learning, and Connoisseurship in Old-Time Music” (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2018); Richard Jones-Bamman, *Building New Banjos for an Old-Time World* (University of Illinois Press, 2017); Amy Suzanne Wooley, “Conjuring Utopia: The Appalachian String Band Revival” (University of California Los Angeles, 2003); David Wood, “A Mixed-Methods Study of Affective Difference in the Old-Time Music Revival in Appalachian Virginia and North Carolina” (Brown University, 2015).

<sup>82</sup> Rosenberg, *Transforming Traditions: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, 197.



time fiddle transcriptions represent complex approaches to articulating and engaging with a tradition.

I strive to be cautious in my use of “comparison,” given the controversial regard for comparative study in the history of ethnomusicology, particularly its association with undesirable qualities like prematurity, superficiality, or neglect of contexts. In his chapter, “Revisiting Comparison, Comparative Study, and Comparative Musicology,” Nettl concludes by reminding that, “more recently, and particularly in the twenty-first century, we may have become ready to admit that much of what we have always done has had a basis in comparison. Comparative study is again becoming respectable among a variety of recognized methodologies of the ethnomusicological arsenal.”<sup>83</sup> In fact, as noted earlier, my study is aligned with other comparative transcription works that have placed multiple transcriptions of similar or identical sounds in contrast to one another.

Nettl remarks how the 1963 Society for Ethnomusicology symposium took place seven decades after the first transcriptions based on recordings had been made and connects this fact with ongoing shying away from the examination of transcriptions in publications and reviews. He theorizes that this general avoidance is related to the highly personal nature of transcription (“the emotional impact of publishing transcriptions seems almost to have been like that of composition”), and simultaneously how once transcriptions are published, they are broadly assumed to be “correct” or “right.”<sup>84</sup> I read this as an invitation for more transcription analysis within the field of ethnomusicology, and while the scope of my research is limited to three specific transcription approaches, it makes room for a broader survey of old-time transcription. Some scholars who have taken on similar surveys of transcription approaches include Victoria

<sup>83</sup> Bruno Nettl, *Nettl's Elephant: On the History of Ethnomusicology* (University of Illinois Press, 2010), 89.

<sup>84</sup> Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 84.

Levine (2002), who presents the history of transcribed Native American songs, and Ellingson's broader survey of transcription approaches and measuring their effectiveness.<sup>85</sup>

### *Research Development*

The questions of this research focus on the differences among approaches to transcribing old-time fiddle tunes and what those differences suggest about how information is prioritized and underlying purposes. As I sought out transcriptions that would be useful to this project, I was drawn to three in particular. As a member of the old-time music community, I was aware of all three sources before this project began. The 2011 publication of the MKC was big news at that time, as the largest published collection of old-time fiddle tune transcriptions and a useful resource for finding new repertoire and source artist information. For my Alaskan community, it represented a new access point for growing one's personal repertoire outside the realm of festivals, workshops, and music communities in other states. I learned about my colleague Roy Andrade's tunebook project as he worked on it in 2018 and 2019, and through him heard about Drew Beisswenger's detailed approach to the transcriptions in the book. Andrade and I had many conversations about the complexity of deciding which information should be included in old-time transcriptions generally and why. I had heard of fiddler John Engle through the years, and first met him in 2018 when he visited East Tennessee State University and led a workshop. He mentioned his own system for notating bowings and rhythms, and I later saw examples.

As a music educator with experience in differing pedagogical worlds, I knew that standard western notation was not always well suited to the task of communicating a tune. And as an old-time musician, I knew that the tradition favored oral and aural transmission, but that the use of notation was increasingly prevalent as the community expanded and people from different

<sup>85</sup> Victoria Lindsay Levine, "Writing American Indian Music: Historic Transcriptions, Notations, and Arrangements," *Music of the U.S.A.*, 2002; Ellingson, "Transcription."

backgrounds took an interest in learning more about the tradition. In developing my research question for this project, I knew I wanted to focus on analyzing approaches to transcribing old-time fiddle tunes. I wanted to know how transcribers used standard western notation, how they tweaked it (or did away with it altogether), and what information a reader can and cannot get from different transcriptions. Therefore, my criteria for choosing transcriptions included finding sources that provided key points of contrast and that overlapped in their choice of repertoire.

To demonstrate differences most clearly, I compare three examples of transcriptions of the same recording. While the three sources I chose (MKC, AFT, and John Engle) are only some of the many examples of old-time fiddle tune transcriptions, they each provide helpful points of comparison and together represent a range of approaches and underlying purposes. In the case of John Engle, his approach includes both a traditional staff notation of the tune and a bowing transcription using his own system. By including the examples from John Engle, I am able to represent alternative, non-standard western approaches to presenting written old-time musical information, an untapped scholarly expansion and a valuable new perspective on transcription and transmission.

In order to select a specific tune for analysis, I examined the repertoire included in the MKC and the AFT and created a list of names of fiddlers that were represented in both. To find overlap with John Engle's transcriptions, I then shared the preliminary list of names with Engle to see which he had familiarity with and narrowed my list to match. Next I looked at the specific tunes by the artists on the list that were included in both the MKC and AFT, and narrowed my selection to a sampling of tunes from Melvin Wine and Tommy Jarrell. After spending time with many transcriptions from the MKC and AFT, focusing especially on the transcriptions of performances by Melvin Wine and Tommy Jarrell, I decided to focus only on the transcriptions

of Tommy Jarrell’s performance of “Devil in the Strawstack.” This tune provided me with ample information to examine, including good representations of the points of difference among the transcription approaches like dealing with variations, issues of pitch, and bowing choices. This tune is by no means meant to speak for the vast array of old-time fiddle styles, it is simply a point of overlap amongst three transcribers that provides solid ground for comparison. Starting from a focused point—three representations of one recording—allows for a conversation that encompasses issues relatable to more than this one fiddler’s performance of one tune.

### *Analytical Framework*

I structure my transcription analysis using specific categories to identify points of similarity and difference amongst the three transcriptions. After examining dozens of old-time tunebooks and hundreds of transcriptions, I started to see themes in the type of information presented. I identified six such themes that make up my categories for analysis: variations, modes and key signatures, pitch, tunings and double stops, beats and crookedness, and bowing. In Chapter 4, I introduce each transcription source generally, and characterize their general approach as demonstrated in the text or supported by interview content. Then I put the three examples in direct comparison using the specified categories, guided by the following questions:

- Variations. I asked how each transcription handles the existence of variations—altering the tune in some way as it gets repeated—within Tommy Jarrell’s performance of “Devil in the Strawstack.” How does each transcriber present the “core” version of the tune? How do these versions compare? Do the transcriptions identify specific variations, and if so, how and how many?
- Modes and Key Signatures. I asked how each transcription presents information about the family of notes used in the tune. What key signature do they use? Do they specify a

Greek mode, and if so, which one? How does the inclusion of this information help a reader? If the specified key signatures or modes in each transcription are different from one another, what might this tell us?

- **Pitch.** This category encompasses a large range of details including general note choice, non-standard notes, ornamentation, and slides. How did each transcriber choose to articulate Tommy Jarrell's performance from a pitch perspective? Where are there instances of difference, and what types of differences are they? How has each transcriber used the structure of standard western notation, and how have they augmented it?
- **Tunings and Double Stops.** This section examines how each transcription articulates the way a player should tune their instrument. What tuning do they mention, and do they all identify the same one? If not, what does that suggest? How does each transcriber approach the existence of double stops or drones (two notes played simultaneously) in Tommy Jarrell's performance? When do they decide to notate double stops and when do they not? What might this tell us about the way they interpret the recording, or the intended purpose of the transcription?
- **Beats and Crookedness.** Here I address how each transcription articulates the type and amount of beats in the tune. Most broadly, "crookedness" in old-time music refers to tunes that are not cleanly dividable into 4 or 8 bars containing 4 beats each. While "Devil in the Strawstack" is not considered a crooked old-time tune, the three transcriptions do provide contrasting examples of approaches to articulating length of phrases and forms. Given the importance of crookedness as a theme in old-time repertoire, it is worth mentioning in this section how these specific transcription approaches point to general thinking on notating beats and crookedness.

- Bowing. After analyzing each western staff notation for the bow markings included or not included, I then examine John Engle’s specific bowing transcription for “Devil in the Strawstack.” I introduce his system for notating bowings, and address the ways a system like his offers a reader different information than the western staff transcriptions.

In discussing fiddle tune transcriptions, I refer to different sections of the tune as the “A-part” and “B-part” (of course some tunes have more than two parts and would be labeled as “C” and “D” and so forth, but the examples analyzed in Chapter 3 happen to include only two parts). These parts are labeled in the AFT and Engle’s transcriptions as “A” and “B”, and are commonly understood as such. It is worth noting, however, that Milliner and Koken make a point not to label parts as “A” or “B” or any other kind of designation other than the occasional visual cue of repeat signs and double bar lines at the end of transcriptions. This distinction is covered in the Chapter 4 analysis, but in my comparative discussions I refer to parts consistently as “A-part” or “B-part” or refer to where a section is spatially if necessary. When alternate endings are notated (as in MKC and AFT), they are labeled as “1” and “2” and I refer to them as the first and second endings.

When referencing pitches as depicted on the staff, I use the pitch-class name (A, B-flat, C-sharp, etc.) and the International Standards Organization (ISO) system for register designations. The ISO system labels middle C (the first ledger line below the western treble

staff) as C4. An octave higher than that would be C5, an octave lower would be C3, and so forth.

For example:

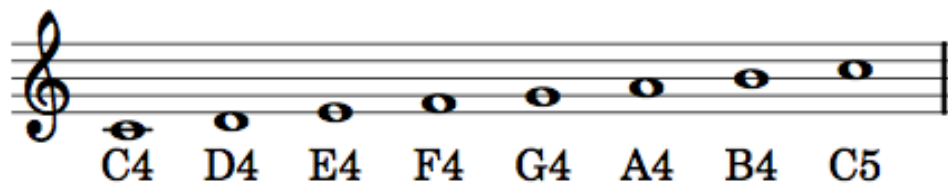


Figure 1. International Standards Organization (ISO) system for register designations. Image from [openmusictheory.com](http://openmusictheory.com)

I have a background in reading western notation, and while I am not an expert sight reader and do not have advanced training in music theory, I am proficient enough to hum along with transcriptions as I read and to imagine the sounds played on a fiddle. To best discover some of the differences between the three transcriptions, I also played them on my fiddle. I played from each version dozens of times, sometimes with no stylistic emphasis (aiming to isolate the information on the page), and sometimes with greater stylistic influence from my experience with old-time music and familiarity with the source recording. Playing from the transcriptions helped illuminate and confirm various details and differences among them, including distinct rhythms, melodic choices, bowings, and double stops. For example, playing the A-part of the MKC transcription made the comparatively longer D4 note in the middle of the first line stick out much more clearly to me than I noticed just by viewing the transcription. In playing from the transcriptions I was also better able to make sense of denser moments, places where many types of information coincided, as in the second ending to the A-part in the AFT transcription, where double stops, a new rhythm, non-standard pitch movement, and suggested bow strokes all take place.

While the bulk of my analysis does not rely on my experience of playing from the transcriptions, it was a crucial part of the research process. In addition to the insights mentioned

above, playing from the transcriptions and playing in-person with John Engle was a way for me to invoke Titon's concept of musical "being-in-the-world."<sup>86</sup> Titon seeks to ground "musical *knowing*—that is, knowledge of our or about music—in musical *being*," a practice that can facilitate greater experience of self in relation to others, and allows one access to the world of interpretation.<sup>87</sup> "Interpretation turns sound into music," Titon says, and "be-ing into meaning."<sup>88</sup>

The musicological analysis is supported by additional contextual information provided by the transcribers. While in essence the transcriptions are in the same format (symbols on a page representing a range of musical information), the contextual information was acquired in three necessarily different ways. The MKC is a published book that includes a narrative introduction that addresses the authors' intentions, assumptions, and transcription process, as well as contextual information about their choice of repertoire and individual backgrounds. So while I had no personal contact with the authors, I am able to quote their published text directly as needed in my overview and analysis of their transcription.

The AFT is an unpublished manuscript, and while the published version will include what I am sure is nuanced and helpful information about the artists and transcription process, I was working purely from the pages that included the transcription drafts and associated "musical notes." To gather more information about the transcriber and the transcriptions, and to better represent this transcription compared to the MKC with its ample narrative context, I conducted a structured interview through email. I sent the authors a list of questions, reviewed the responses, and reference their answers in my analysis as needed.

<sup>86</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, "Knowing Fieldwork," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2008), 32.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.



Access to and analysis of John Engle's bowing transcriptions required insight from Engle himself, so I arranged for a series of interviews. I visited Engle at his home in Mars Hill, North Carolina twice, in November and December of 2019. For communications with my sources, I followed the suggestions that James Spradley lays out in his book *The Ethnographic Interview*, especially those outlined in the chapter on "Interviewing an Informant," including stating explicit purpose, giving ethnographic explanations, and asking ethnographic questions.<sup>89</sup> My sessions with Engle were unstructured though supported by a set of questions generated to address the type of information already acquired from the other transcribers. During my visits with Engle, I came prepared with these questions, and also armed with Jeff Todd Titon's insight on the "different kinds of knowing" that arise from structured interviews versus stories told to sympathetic listeners. In his chapter, "Knowing Fieldwork" from *Shadows in the Field*, Titon describes how fieldwork has come to be viewed not as "observing and collecting (although it certainly involves that) but as experiencing and understanding music." His emphasis on understanding over explanation, while perhaps most applicable to larger ethnographic undertakings, guided my fieldwork for this research, particularly in my time spent with John Engle. This approach led to more nuanced comprehension of Engle's transcriptions and philosophies, and thus a more detailed analysis and discussion.

Engle's transcriptions are quite reflective of his general understanding of old-time fiddling, so our conversations were often concerned with the kinesthetic experience of fiddling, the fundamentals of bowing, and the inherent limitations of some tune transcriptions. I took quick field notes during our sessions and more substantial ones immediately afterward, largely consisting of specific words, phrases, or analogies Engle used, and summaries of our

<sup>89</sup> James Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979).

conversations. In addition to gaining the ability to better interpret Engle's transcriptions, another outcome of these sessions was building trust and musical kinship. Developing this type of relationship led to greater understanding of Engle as a transcriber, musician, and person—identities that are inextricably linked, and are reflected in his transcriptions.

While this study is not firmly within the realm of a single methodological framework, it is informed by the methods of musicology, ethnomusicology, and ethnography, as described above. Inevitably, my decision-making has influenced this research: in the development of a methodological framework, my interview strategies, the use of reading/playing from transcriptions, and my background as a musician, educator, and old-time community-member. Just as the transcriptions I analyze are sites for the (re)production of the authors' ideology, this thesis is the product of my own experiences and subjectivity. Informed by Clifford's idea of dialogic truth and Tilton's emphasis on "different types of knowing," I believe my position in the research contributes opportunities and strengths to the study. This notion is directly supported by scholar Steinar Kvale, who discusses the role of acknowledged bias in his book, *Doing*

#### *Interviews:*

"Unacknowledged bias may entirely invalidate the results of an...inquiry. A recognized bias or subjective perspective may, however, come to highlight specific aspects of the phenomenon being investigated and bring new dimensions forward, contributing to a multi-perspectival construction of knowledge."<sup>90</sup>

In the musicological analysis in Chapter 4, I employ specific categories to identify points of similarity and difference amongst the transcriptions: variations, beats and crookedness, tunings and double stops, pitch, modes and key signatures, and bowing. Additional contextual information was obtained through in-person or email interviews and through analysis of

<sup>90</sup> Steinar Kvale, *Doing Interviews* (SAGE Publications, 2007), 86.

published texts. I also took advantage of my experience as a fiddler and notation-reader in order to better engage with the transcriptions and illuminate details, calling upon Titon's concept of musical "being-in-the-world" and his thoughts regarding "different kinds of knowing." In the next chapter, before diving into the six categories of analysis, I begin by introducing the focus tune, Tommy Jarrell's "Devil in the Strawstack," and then present the three transcribers and their distinct approaches.

## CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS

Throughout this chapter, I will make reference to the following transcriptions:

### Devil in the Strawstack

As played by Tommy Jarrell in *The Legacy of Tommy Jarrell, Vol. 1, Sail Away Ladies* (County Records CO-CD-2724, 1999); recorded 1976; time: 4/4; key: A; scale: hexatonic minor (no 6th; some higher 3rd, 7th); pattern: AAB(X3) AA (all 4); tuning: GDAE; pitch: 0/0

The musical score for "Devil in the Strawstack" is presented in three systems. The first system begins with a tempo marking of 106 and a key signature of one sharp (F#). It includes a section labeled 'A' and variations V1 and V2. The second system continues with variations V3 and V4, and a section labeled 'B'. The third system shows variations V5 and the 'Ending from \*'. The score is written in 4/4 time and includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and fingerings.

The word "devil" is in many fiddle tune titles. Tuneare.org lists 16 fiddle tune titles about a devil being in, on, upon, or among something, and more about a devil eating, catching, chasing, or shaking something. Perhaps some early fiddlers liked to use the word "devil" in titles because they thought it conveyed a wildness or excitement to the tunes. Conversely, some early 20th century fiddlers who were trying to shake their music's association with wild dances likely wished to downplay any devil associations. This particular tune, closely connected to Tommy Jarrell and not recorded by early string bands, has possible links to the Civil War era. At the beginning of the recording, Jarrell says, "Well, right here's a little tune I learned from old man Zack Payne. He was an old confederate veteran. He was 52 years old when I heard him play it, and he called it 'Devil in the Strawstack.'" Musical notes: the starkness created by the wide sometimes-dissonant double stops is distinctive. I chose to call this a Dorian hexatonic tune (no sixth), but the third and seventh scale notes are unstable, so one could make a case for calling it a hexatonic major tune. Better yet, one could conduct a complex analysis of the scale changes, especially in the modal B part. In the second measure of that part, Jarrell shifts from a G sharp to a G natural, while playing an A drone though most of the measure. Interesting stuff!

Figure 2. Drew Beisswenger's transcription from book, *Appalachian Fiddle Tunes* (exp. 2020)

**Devil in the Strawstack**  
Tommy Jarrell

arranged by John Engle

GDAE

**A**  $\text{♩} = 111$

5

**B**

9

13

Figure 3. John Engle's staff transcription

**Devil in the Strawstack**  
Tommy Jarrell

arranged by John Engle

12/23/19

**A**

**B**

Figure 4. John Engle's bowing transcription



Figure 5. Clare Milliner and Walt Koken's transcription, from their book, *The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes* (2011)

### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I provide background on the artist and recording that the focus transcriptions are based on: Tommy Jarrell's "Devil in the Strawstack." I then introduce each transcriber and characterize their general approach to transcription, and provide an overview of how they conducted the work of transcribing ("Transcription as Act"). The bulk of the chapter is devoted to "Transcription as Outcome," where I present the three transcriptions and conduct an analysis using six categories: variations, beats and crookedness, tunings and double stops, pitch, modes and key signatures, and bowing. These categories provide helpful structure and assist in identifying the transcribers' decision-making.

The three transcription approaches of "Devil in the Strawstack" come from the following sources: the "Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes" by Clare Milliner and Walt Koken (2011), the "Appalachian Fiddle Tunes" unpublished manuscript by Roy Andrade, Drew Beisswenger, and Scott Prouty, and a private collection of transcriptions by North Carolina

musician John Engle. The “Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes” is a landmark collection of 1404 transcriptions published in 2011, which presents a more streamlined approach to transcribing old-time fiddle tunes, and some unique choices like omitting bar lines.

“Appalachian Fiddle Tunes” presents 189 transcriptions presented with abundant information including variations, modes, and extra narrative “notes” on the music or source included with the staff transcriptions. John Engle’s approach is two-fold: a relatively “clean” staff notation plus a bowing transcription presented in Engle’s own system of tick-marks to indicate bow strokes, direction, and duration.

By placing three transcriptions of the same tune in direct comparison, their differences become more apparent, helping to indicate the range of information that a transcription can and cannot represent. One type of information that transcription always succeeds at presenting is the underlying values of the transcriber. As Nettl said, “a type of notation must select from the acoustic phenomena those which the notator considers most essential.”<sup>91</sup> And Shen, in his discussion of the displacement of Chinese words by western-derived terminology, says, “the description achieved through notation is itself actually a narrative about the musical sound.”<sup>92</sup> Given that transcription will always represent a reduction of sound to visual form, this comparative transcription analysis helps reveal how different transcribers go about prioritizing information, and how their different approaches to transcribing the same old-time fiddle tune can reflect the intentions of the authors.

<sup>91</sup> Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*, 98.

<sup>92</sup> Shen, “FACING THE PREDICAMENT OF WORDLESSNESS: WHEN WE SPEAK OF CERTAIN MUSICAL SOUNDS,” 26.

*Tommy Jarrell and “Devil in the Strawstack”*

Tommy Jarrell (1901-1985) was a fiddler, banjo player, and singer from Surry County, NC. He learned much of his repertoire of fiddle tunes, Baptist hymns, and ballads from his father, Ben Jarrell, well-respected fiddler and member of the short-lived group Da Costa Woltz and his Southern Broadcasters. Tommy began performing at an early age and was celebrated locally for his music throughout his life. He received widespread national awareness in the 1970s as many young musicians sought him out as a mentor, and he performed at events like the Smithsonian’s Festival of American Folklife.<sup>93</sup> He was recorded often, and in 1976 he released his own record, *Tommy Jarrell: Sail Away Ladies* (County Records #756/#2724). His music has been extremely influential in shaping the repertoires and styles of many in the contemporary old-time music community, particularly in establishing what is now referred to as “round peak” style playing.

Among the tracks included on Jarrell’s *Sail Away Ladies* album is “Devil in the Strawstack.” In the recording, a listener can hear Jarrell say, “Well right here’s a little tune I learned from old man Zack Payne. He was an old confederate veteran. He was 82 years old when I heard him play it, and he called it ‘Devil in the Strawstack.’” According to Drew Beisswenger, one of the transcribers studied here, this tune is closely connected to Jarrell and was not recorded by early stringbands. Jarrell’s affiliation with fiddler Zack Payne indicates that this tune has Civil War era connections.

The tune has been recorded by other artist through the years, including one version with lyrics recorded by The Harmony Sisters (Alice Gerrard, Irene Herrmann, and Jeanie McLerie) who state in the liner notes of their album *Harmony Pie* (Flying Fish Records, 1981), “it does not

<sup>93</sup> Daniel Sheehy, “Jarrell, Tommy,” *Grove Music Online*, 2013.



traditionally have words but in the late-night aftermath of a bluegrass festival Tommy and his friend, the late Calvin Robins composed these words.” Beisswenger also remarks on the title of the tune, noting that the word “devil” is used in many fiddle tune titles possibly because some early fiddlers “thought it conveyed a wildness or excitement to the tunes.” Conversely, he mentions, “some early 20<sup>th</sup> century fiddlers who were trying to shake their music’s association with wild dances likely wished to downplay any devil associations.”<sup>94</sup>

*The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes*

Clare Milliner and Walt Koken released *The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes* (MKC) in 2011 through their publishing company, Mudthumper Music. The book is a big one, physically and in scope. It includes 1404 transcriptions organized alphabetically by title, and the back of the book includes a range of supplemental information: the “Comments” section includes notes on tune forms, sources, relationships between similar tunes, and lyrics (though some lyrics are instead printed on a tune’s transcription page); an “Artists’ Profiles” table lists brief biographical information for each referenced artist (I find this section particularly useful); they’ve provided three indexes of tunes grouped respectively by key, tuning, and artist; and a final index sorted by tune title with source recording information.

The MKC introduction implies the authors felt bothered by the trend of “festival versions” of tunes drifting from “source versions” and compelled to better represent the details of earlier versions of tunes. While each of their transcriptions is clearly connected to one recording of one artist playing the tune, the transcriptions at times feel a bit generalized, rather than revealing some true essence of that artist’s recorded performance. That said, their book is a wonderful reference for locating source recordings across a wide range of old-time fiddle styles,

<sup>94</sup> Roy Andrade, Drew Beisswenger, and Scott Prouty, “Appalachian Fiddle Tunes (Unpublished Manuscript)” (Mel Bay Publications, 2020).

and in that way it can help members of the old-time music community connect more with versions of tunes the authors fear will be abandoned.

A few aspects of their introduction could benefit from further examination. For example, in identifying the breadth of styles represented by their source recordings, Milliner and Koken mention “old style unaccompanied fiddle to two or three fiddles in a full string band setting, with guitars and banjos, even a cello, bowed bass, or pump organ.” They go on to state, “these are the forms from which, in an earlier era, much of our western classical music has been derived.”<sup>95</sup> That is a big claim, and while I understand the connection they are trying to draw and sense of significance they wish to instill, they might have clarified that statement.

The most noteworthy point of difference in the MKC transcriptions is the omission of bar lines, which are typically used to demarcate measures of equal beats according to the tune’s time signatures. The authors decided that old-time fiddle tunes are best represented without bar lines, relying instead on a reader’s ability to deduce the steady beat of a tune by reading the rhythms and observing how beats are connected by “beams.” Milliner and Koken address this decision in their introduction, and the topic is more fully explored in the “Beats and Crookedness” section.

The MKC approach to transcription is best summarized when the authors simply say, “we have tried to clearly set down the notes of the melody.”<sup>96</sup> In this sense, they have succeeded. The MKC transcriptions include markings of fiddle tunings in the left corner, the source musician, generally one version of the tune’s form with occasional variations or unique endings, no bowing markings, a clear melody, and generally do not include many double stops. This approach is similar to Ruth Crawford Seeger’s in her notations for *Our Singing Country* as well as Jeff Todd

<sup>95</sup> Clare Milliner and Walt Koken, *The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes* (Kennett Square, PA: Mudthumper Music, 2011), iii.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

Titon's transcriptions in *Old Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes*. Though the MKC authors do not address this intention explicitly, I content they would align with Seeger and Titon's commitment to providing a compromise between "a skeletal version (bare outline) that would not convey the individuality of the fiddler's setting and a very detailed transcription too cumbersome to read easily."<sup>97</sup>

*Appalachian Fiddle Tunes, The Andrade-Beisswenger-Prouty Manuscript*

Roy Andrade, Drew Beisswenger, and Scott Prouty have put together a collection of fiddle tune transcriptions due to be published in 2020 by Mel Bay Publications, a publishing house well-known for its expansive publication of music instruction books. *Appalachian Fiddle Tunes* (AFT) as a project began in 2014, and after a hiatus resumed development in 2016. The collection includes tunes of fiddlers from Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina, a region the authors feel encompasses what has come to be known as Appalachian old-time fiddling. Prouty was initially responsible for deciding which fiddlers and tunes were included, though Andrade and Beisswenger added favorites as the book developed, including Andrade's notable addition of Tennessee's Fiddlin' John Dykes. In addition to the 189 transcriptions, the book also provides 48 original artist biographies that made use of contemporary research sources like online ancestry databases and digitized newspapers, amending and expanding on existing biographical information about the fiddlers presented.

Beisswenger, music librarian at the University of Arkansas, is the transcriber of the tunes in the book. He has authored or co-authored five other books related to North American fiddle music and has been an active contributor to the fields of folklore and ethnomusicology through his varied work in American music. Like most tunebook authors, Beisswenger is himself a

<sup>97</sup> Titon, *Old-Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes*, 29.

musician, with particular interest in early country music, old-time string band music, early gospel and blues, and western swing music styles.

Beisswenger states that the book is intended for “the old-time music community, libraries, and anyone interested in the subject matter,” and that he feels the book fulfills “an important need.”<sup>98</sup> As of February 2020, the AFT manuscript is as yet unpublished, though Andrade has shared with me the full collection of transcription drafts last edited in November 2019. While I have not reviewed the narrative portions of the book, the transcriptions themselves are particularly detailed, and one can glean a lot about their function and intention unaccompanied. These transcriptions pack a punch. Beisswenger takes a detail-driven approach to transcribing old-time fiddle tunes, endeavoring to communicate as much information as he can about what he hears in the source recordings. Much like Marion Thede’s approach, Beisswenger offers abundant information to a viewer.

Each AFT tune is presented as one complete form, with selected variations presented separately below, identified by titles like “V1” (variation one) and “V2” (variation two). Those titles are then placed above the place in the tune where the corresponding variation is meant to occur. Sometimes the same variation occurs in multiple places throughout the tune, and so a viewer may see “V1” appear multiple times. Beisswenger’s emphasis on richness and complexity is present in the transcriptions through his inclusion of not just variations, but ample melodic information, double stops, some bowing markings, symbols for non-standard pitch placement or movement, and sizeable narrative notes below each transcription. His commitment to including “everything [he] could think of” supports his assertion that transcription in general is

<sup>98</sup> Drew Beisswenger, “Email to Author,” 2019.

a “valuable way to communicate the richness of the music, and to help fiddlers understand complex passages.”<sup>99</sup>

### *John Engle’s Transcriptions*

John Engle is an old-time musician who lives in Mars Hill, NC. He is widely regarded as an expert in the fiddling of Tommy Jarrell and Joe Birchfield. He teaches fiddle lessons privately and at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, NC, and for a few years at a music camp in Shasta, CA. He has performed in bands with regional old-time musicians including John Herrman, Meredith McIntosh, and Frank and Allie Lee, and attributes his initial interest in old-time music to hearing Frank Lee’s band, the Freight Hoppers, around 1995. Engle states that while he couldn’t articulate it at the time, “what attracted me [to old-time music] was what Judith Mackrell calls the kinesthetic echoes of performance.”<sup>100</sup> Judith Mackrell is a dance critic who has authored books on dance as well as writing for *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. The connection between dance and old-time fiddling is a significant one for Engle, and became an underlying theme in all of our conversations about fiddling and transcribing.

In fact, it was Engle’s interest in the physical sensations available in fiddling that drove him to explore transcribing in the first place; rather than beginning with melodic content, he started transcribing bowing only, with no notes, around 2005. His method has remained largely unchanged: using simple tick-marks (like an apostrophe or comma), he notes the bow strokes he hears; each up bow gets a higher mark, each down bow gets a lower mark, following the direction of the bow stroke. Additionally, each beat is marked, so he might use multiple marks in a row in the higher or lower position, indicating perhaps a multi-beat note or a slur of multiple

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> John Engle, “Email Interview with Author,” 2020.

notes together in one bow stroke. He has developed a system of marking certain patterns that he calls “roots,” marked in the sample transcriptions in shaded grey boxes.

In his words, Engle’s bowing transcriptions “depict stroke timing, direction and duration, with a way to see the rhythmic pieces responsible for giving the physical feel to a passage of bowing.”<sup>101</sup> To hear bow strokes like this is indicative of significant familiarity with the music style, and through his years of intent listening and playing, Engle is confident in his interpretation of old-time fiddling, especially through the lens of bowing and the broader kinesthetic experience of fiddling.

It was 10 years after he began making his bowing transcriptions that Engle started incorporating standard notation, as he realized that “some rhythmic intentions work best if supported by specific melodic sequences.”<sup>102</sup> His approach to transcribing in standard notation is to provide a “stripped-out skeleton of the melody, with bowing symbols, ties and slurs.”<sup>103</sup> Having melodic transcriptions on hand provides “an easier reference than a recording for spot-checking during the process of learning a tune.”<sup>104</sup>

Engle’s transcriptions began as a study device for himself, a way to dig deeper into the music he was learning in order to understand it better. He jokingly told me that they are called ‘notes’ after all, so he uses them as such! For many years, he says, “I didn’t keep any [transcriptions]. I made a new one each time I readdressed a tune—working out a transcription was my process for learning.”<sup>105</sup> He only keeps them now because he started teaching more, and some students find them helpful. In his teaching, he has found that he can get through much

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

more material in a short amount of time if a student is comfortable working from his transcriptions. Engle is most interested in teaching what is *not* on the page, so transcriptions have proven to be a useful tool for expediting the initial phase of information acquisition for his students. He is also quick to remark that while transcriptions can make instruction more efficient, they might be limiting if not supplemented with listening and watching: “That might be like trying to learn to cook *from* a cookbook, rather than *with* a cookbook.”<sup>106</sup>

Engle’s full system of bowing transcription and analysis is quite in-depth and worthy of its own thesis. For the sake of this project, I elected to provide an overview of his approach to demonstrate his unique perspective and to allow for a reader to view his bowing transcriptions and have a sense of the information they communicate. I include both Engle’s staff notation and bowing transcription for consistency and to facilitate better interpretation of the bowing transcription.

### *Transcription as Act*

The MKC transcriptions were made by hand initially and then converted through computer software. The authors state that the editing and “re-working” process spanned seven years, and that they confidently “feel that the information is quite complete.”<sup>107</sup> Their transcriptions represent a streamlined approach to marking the outlines of tunes, perhaps a reflection of the book’s origins: Clare Milliner came from a classical music background, and she made her own transcriptions of tunes (after twenty years, about 1500, the authors say) heard at festivals and jam sessions in order to learn and memorize them herself. As access to field recordings and reissues of 78s and LPs became more available, the authors were able to compare Milliner’s “festival versions” to the “original” versions and were struck by the amount of

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Milliner and Koken, *The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes*, v.

difference. The authors indicate that their final transcriptions are in line with their commitment to perpetuating “original” versions of tunes, so they conducted revisions of tunes to suit.

Beisswenger’s transcription process involved listening to source recordings slowed down using the Amazing Slow Downer software, writing notation by hand on manuscript paper, and then digitizing his transcriptions in Finale, a music notation software. He states that he added details later in the process. “I tried to include everything I could think of,” he says.<sup>108</sup>

John Engle’s transcription process began with notating bow strokes with pen and paper, making tick-marks for each bow stroke. He later began converting these to computer files using word processing software, and spent a good amount of time finding appropriate fonts that would distribute the comma and apostrophe symbols appropriately, a more difficult task than one would think. He now skips the hand-written step and goes straight to computer files, using templates he has created for himself. He is so well-versed in the process that, depending on the quality of a source recording, he “can make a bowing transcription in as little as a few minutes.”<sup>109</sup> After marking bow strokes he then shades certain patterns to mark them as “roots,” units of measure from his self-developed system of organizing bowing patterns. He has explored using a color-coding system for marking roots, but all samples we looked at used greyscale boxes as seen in the examples in this paper.

Staff notation takes Engle a little longer to complete, he says. He uses a software called LilyPond to build them, then listens to them in MIDI format using the platform Frescobaldi. For his staff notations, Engle’s aim is to provide a “stripped-out skeleton of the melody, with bowing symbols, ties and slurs.”<sup>110</sup> Because Engle’s transcriptions are primarily study and instruction

<sup>108</sup> Beisswenger, “Email to Author.”

<sup>109</sup> Engle, “Email Interview with Author.”

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.



tools, his process is adaptable to suit new circumstances. For example, to support beginning fiddle students, he has created simpler versions of bowings and melodies.

Engle includes on each transcription, “Arranged by John Engle.” Of course, the other two transcription sources are published books, so there is contextual evidence of their authorship, but to me Engle’s inclusion of “arranger” information is small but significant: it indicates how he views his own role in the transcription, his awareness of the handiwork of the transcriber present in the transcription.

### *Transcription as Outcome*

#### *Variations*

When referencing performances that feature multiple passes through the same tune, old-time fiddle tune transcribers have to make judgement calls about which should be highlighted as a “core” version; nearly all old-time fiddle tunebooks feature only one full form of the tune, and only sometimes feature selected variations, even more rarely identify all variations. This focus on a foundation version makes sense given how western musical sensibility tends to be oriented around core melodies that provide a reference point for variations. On another hand, old-time fiddlers have been demonstrated to be masters of variation and improvisation, some never playing a tune the same way twice as a point of pride. Some old-time fiddlers could be defined by their ability to restate tunes in multiple ways—fiddlers like Doc Roberts, Ed Haley, and Clark Kessinger.

The task of transcribing an old-time fiddler’s performance of a tune, particularly when grounded by a single recording, can be a challenging one. Some transcribers will pick the first pass through the tune and regard what comes after as variations. Some believe the second or third pass through a tune might be truer to the essence of the tune, since the fiddler will have had a chance to warm up and settle in. When available, cross-referencing one recording with others

of the same fiddler playing the same tune can provide insight into which pass through the tune might be closest to a core version. Then again, plenty of old-time fiddlers who were documented at various stages of their lives can also exemplify how tunes can change over time, and transcriptions could be used to demonstrate such change.<sup>111</sup> In the case of these three transcriptions, the goal is not explicitly to identify change. Rather, they aim to document a single performance of a tune—a snapshot in time.

The three staff transcriptions state the core version similarly. The shape of the tune is similar, with the A-part rolling along with a four-note pattern that repeats, followed by a jump up to a long E5-note that indicates the start of the ending melodically. The B-part states one melodic theme in the first half and answers it with a descending line in the second half.

The AFT transcription is presented as one pass through the complete form plus six noted variations presented separately below, identified as V1 (variation one), V2 (variation two), V3, V4, V5, and a unique final “Ending.” Those titles are placed above where in the core version the corresponding variation is meant to be played. This approach to representing as many variations as the transcriber can identify is a good illustration of Beisswenger’s emphasis on detail, and also a good example of how sometimes including more information can end up indicating less about the transcriber. In this case, Beisswenger has done less streamlining than other transcribers. He has not sifted through the information to prioritize certain aspects of the performance and eliminate others.

<sup>111</sup> Related to the works of Quigley, Goertzen, and Jabbour who demonstrate how transcription can be used to trace change over time and space. Quigley, “Catching Rhymes: Generative Musical Processes in the Compositions of a French Newfoundland Fiddler”; Goertzen and Jabbour, “George P. Knauff’s Virginia Reels and Fiddlings in the Atebellum South”; Goertzen, “George Cecil McLeod, Mississippi’s Fiddling Senator, and the Modern History of American Fiddling.”

Neither the MKC or Engle transcriptions provide variations for “Devil in the Strawstack,” though the MKC addresses the topic in their introduction: “Where only a few variations exist in the performance, we’ve tried to include them all. However, many tunes had too many variations or permutations to show them all. For those tunes, we included quite a few variations and left it at that.”<sup>112</sup> They also state that they believe the second, third, or fourth time through a tune might be truer to a fiddler’s core version, as the first time through is more apt represent a fiddler trying to remember the tune. This approach to handling variation suggests that the MKC strives to identify the underlying essence of tunes, rather than to attempt to document the particularities of one performance of a tune. Similarly, Engle’s staff transcription is streamlined. His transcription is also organized visually by phrase, so what variations do exist within the core version itself are more quickly identifiable. For example, a reader might notice that while the endings of all four phrases are similar, the B-part descends E-D-C-A instead of E-D-B-A like the A-part.

The AFT includes many more double stops than the MKC or Engle versions, but it also overlaps more individually with both the MKC and Engle versions than the MKC and Engle versions do with each other. For example, the MKC’s A-part most closely overlaps with the AFT version if a reader elects to play Variation 2 in measure 2, which indicates the longer D4 in the second half of the measure (see Figure 6). The MKC’s B-part also more closely aligns with the AFT version, notably the first part of the MKC third line and the third measure of the AFT’s B-part echo each other’s melodic and rhythmic choice, whereas Engle’s states a more streamlined 3 quarter note phrase (see Figure 7).

<sup>112</sup> Milliner and Koken, *The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes*, ix.

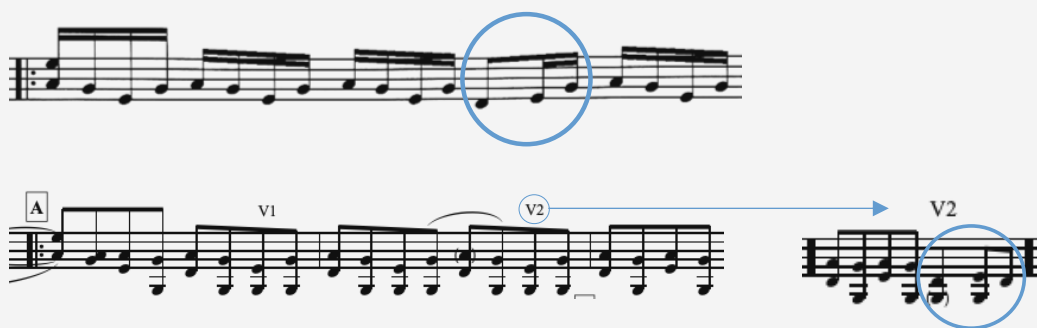


Figure 6. A-part comparison, MKC (top) and AFT



Figure 7. B-part comparison (from top: MKC, AFT, Engle)

While the topic of fiddle tune “parts” or sections is not specifically addressed in this comparative analysis, it is worth noting that the MKC does not label parts of tunes, and this feels related to the theme of variations in terms of the authors’ decision making. They justify this by explaining that some fiddlers would play the parts of a tune in varying orders or varying numbers of times, citing a few specific examples like Isham Monday’s “New Five Cents” or Jim Bowles’ “Nancy Dawson.” They hypothesize that perhaps the fiddler didn’t always recall which part

came next, or would play a part an extra time for singers, or, in the case of recordings featuring square dance calls where one part is played many times and other parts played only once or twice, they ask: “could this have been a traditional method of allowing the dancers to catch up and finish the last allemande and grand right-and-left before starting the next part of the tune?”<sup>113</sup> If a fiddler is fairly consistent in the order of the parts, they say, “we’ve taken that to mean that he or she meant to play the tune parts in that order, and that’s the only order that we used in the transcriptions. If not, we’ve done the best we could, usually by writing the parts in the order they were played the most number of times.”<sup>114</sup>

The MKC includes many of these kind of honest reflections on the subjectivity of the transcription process. Sometimes these reflections also read as an aversion to potentially controversial decision-making, as in their exclusion of bar lines (see the “Beats and Crookedness” section), their grouping of certain crosstunings (see “Tunings and Double Stops” section), and some key signature decisions (see “Modes and Key Signatures” section). Ironically these choices could be said to be the *more* controversial aspects of their book.

### *Beats and Crookedness*

Generally “crookedness” in old-time music refers to tunes that are not cleanly divisible into 4 or 8 bars containing 4 beats each. While “Devil in the Strawstack” is not considered a crooked old-time tune, the three transcriptions do provide contrasting examples of approaches to articulating length of phrases and forms. Given the importance of crookedness as a theme in old-time repertoire, it is worth mentioning in this section how these specific transcription approaches point to general thinking on notating beats and crookedness.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

One of the most noteworthy distinctions of the MKC compared to other old-time transcriptions is the authors' decision to not include bar lines. This was a controversial move according to many readers and musicians, and a choice that the authors address in their introduction: "Despite much criticism from some of our contemporaries, we decided that old-time music is best written with no bar-lines. Rather, the steady beat of the tune is apparent because the notes of any one beat are beamed (connected by a beam across the ends of the note stems), or is a quarter note (one beat)." <sup>115</sup> In other words, they are relying on the regularity of standard western notation wherein eighth notes may be grouped in twos or fours, so a reader could assume that any grouping of notes connected by beams are equal in duration. The authors argue there is precedent for not using bar lines in notation via Eric Satie who composed and notated piano pieces that way in 1912. To their critics they say: use "a pencil with a good eraser." <sup>116</sup>

Some tunes, MKC remarks, don't have a steady beat perhaps because of a connection to a ballad tradition where notes may follow the meter of the words. In these circumstances, I am sympathetic to abandoning the quest for a downbeat. But to abandon it for 1400+ tunes is a sweeping move, perhaps causing more confusion than a few potentially controversial measure-marking decisions. But this is in line with the authors' general hands-off approach in their efforts to avoid potential controversy. In fact, the lack of bar lines could prove to be a valuable learning tool for some, and can allow for deeper individual engagement with beats.

Beisswenger commented on the MKC decision to omit bar lines: "I can respect their decision, although I think adding them, even when I'm guessing, is useful." <sup>117</sup> He includes bar

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., v.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., vi.

<sup>117</sup> Beisswenger, "Email to Author."

lines in all of his transcriptions, as does Engle. Their placement is identical in “Devil in the Strawstack” (unsurprising, given the straightforward form of this particular tune). Engle noted that he includes them even though he knows that “the music is in the phrases, not in the measures,” but the bars represent maps of the phrases in the same way that the notation is a map of the music. I infer Engle’s use of “phrases” to mean complete musical ideas, which may be differing lengths from tune to tune, but to Engle represent truer units of measurement. The MKC could be said to leave room for interpretation of phrases before measures.

The AFT and Engle transcriptions also include tempo markings; AFT marks a half note at 106bpm, Engle’s at 111bpm. Given that Jarrell’s performance of the tune fluctuates some, these both represent accurate overall estimates. Including tempo markings helps a reader imagine the source performance of the tune more in depth, as well as providing a guide for those who use the transcriptions to work toward performing the tune closer to the style of the source.

### *Tunings and Double Stops*

Old-time fiddling encompasses a number of different ways to tune the strings of the fiddle, sometimes used to provide extra resonance, alter the potential for double stops and drones, or simply because a certain tuning has come to be associated with certain tunes. Standard tuning is considered to be G-D-A-E (from lowest string to highest), and other common old-time tunings include cross A (AEAE), cross G (GDGD), and calico tuning (AEAC#). These tunings are generally referred to as crosstuning. In transcribing tunes played on a fiddle “in cross,” a transcriber may choose to represent the pitches by “concert pitch” (the true pitch), or they may use scordatura notation. Scordatura is a word that comes from the western classical music world that refers to non-standard tuning (from the Italian word “to mistune”). It also refers to placing notes on the staff not by “concert pitch” but by pattern one would typically play as if tuned to

GDAE. A fiddler might read a G4 on the staff, which in standard tuning might require use of a third finger on the D-string, but if the fiddle is tuned to AEAE, placing the third finger on the D-string now results in an A4. Use of scordatura in transcription assumes that a viewer has developed significant familiarity with sight reading standard notation, enough that they could separate the aural and visual components of reading notes on the staff.

While each of the primary transcribers featured in this research have transcribed many tunes that use crosstuning, none of them have elected to use scordatura. Milliner and Koken mention this in their introduction, stating that their transcriptions “show the actual melody notes that are heard, regardless of the tuning of the fiddle.”<sup>118</sup> One distinction between the AFT and Engle representations of cross-tuning versus the MKC is that the MKC elects to transcribe every tune that was performed in a double cross tuning (like GDGD or AEAE, for example) in the key of A, as if performed in AEAE tuning. For instance, a tune that was perhaps recorded on a fiddle tuned to FCFC would still be transcribed as being in AEAE. Milliner and Koken say they made this decision in order to avoid “mass confusion.”<sup>119</sup> This is a somewhat bold choice, given the potential range of tunings they group together, but it aligns with their general efforts to avoid possible controversy. Given the variable nature of fiddle tuning and recording technology at the time that many source recordings were made, there are many tricky judgement calls to be made as far as deciding which tunings to transcribe tunes in. In a way, Milliner and Koken do in fact use scordatura tuning, where the pitch notated may not in fact reflect what true pitch the fiddle produces if tuned alternatively than what is notated.

Fiddle tuning often has a great impact on the use of double stops, a technique of playing two notes simultaneously. “Devil in the Strawstack” is identified by each staff transcription as

<sup>118</sup> Milliner and Koken, *The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes*, vii.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., viii.

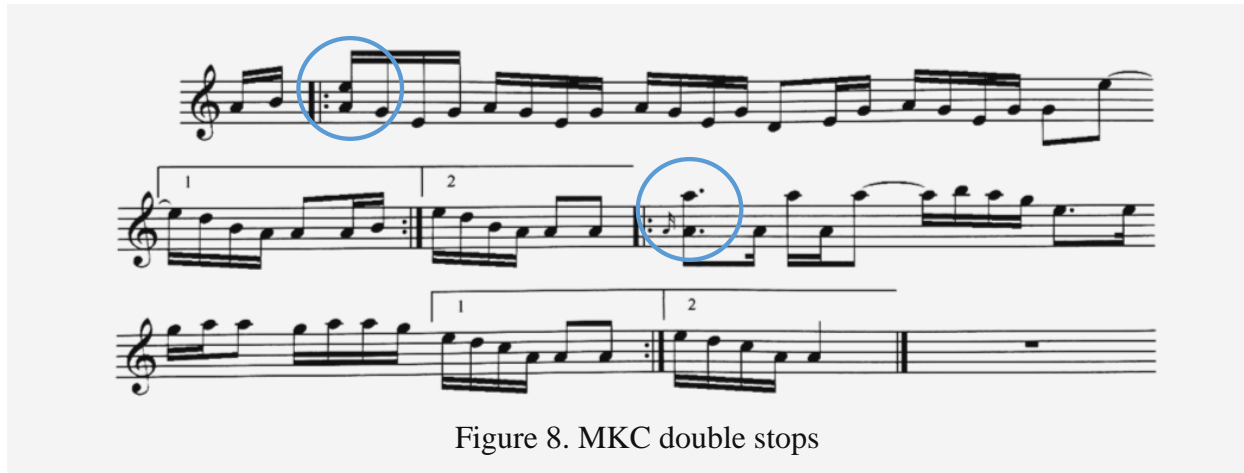


being played in standard GDAE tuning, so issues related to cross-tuning are not present. But double stops play a very important role in “Devil in the Strawstack,” and each transcriber approaches them differently. Engle’s staff notation, most noticeably, does not include any double stops, and the resulting information represents the outcome of his process: he starts with more complex transcriptions and then “strips stuff out” until he arrives at something “simple enough to be useful.” Engle does not want himself or his students to get caught up in the act of reading the notes (“that’s not what we’re here for”), so over time through his work with students he has found a point of simplicity that works for people. By not including double stops, he presents an accessible, linear melody that is intended to be a launching point for learners (this melody also represents what Engle would refer to as a “floor,” the surface on which one dances but isn’t the dance itself, an idea discussed in subsequent sections).

The MKC introduction states that unison notes, drones, and double stops are an integral part of a fiddler’s style. In their transcription process, they have “tried to clearly set down the notes of the melody” (which really encompasses the function of the entire book, not just in regards to including more notes).<sup>120</sup> They included double stops or drones rarely, only on tunes where it seemed “a significant part of the character of the piece...but for the most part we’ve left them out.” They mention William Stepp’s “Bonaparte’s Retreat” as an example of a tune for which double stops seem especially “significant.” Their transcription of “Devil in the Strawstack” includes two double stops, which, after hearing them mention their selectivity in deciding when to include this information, makes these two double stops feel especially special (see Figure 8). The first occurs on the initial downbeat of the A-part, definitively marking the beginning of the section. Fittingly, the second double stop occurs at the initial downbeat of the

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

B-part, giving that section a clear demarcation as well. This information indicates a strong sense of musical symmetry, and presents an approachable way to use double stops given their placement rhythmically and their use of neighboring open strings.



Beisswenger conducts much less prioritizing of information—or perhaps much more—by including *all* double stops that he can discern. A mere 15 notes appear unpartnered with another, and the vast majority of the tune is shown to make use of double-stops. These double stops could be seen as a defining characteristic of this tune, given the particular sound of open G- and D-strings against a melody oriented around A and E. The AFT comments on this in the “Musical notes” section placed below the transcription. It reads: “the starkness created by the wide sometimes-dissonant double stops is distinctive.” The inclusion of all the double stops plus the narrative note about their distinctiveness may make for a more nuanced representation of Tommy Jarrell’s performance, and a denser read.

Engle might argue that in including all the double stops one makes a transcription less accessible, a priority in his own transcribing. He prefers to think of a transcription as a map, and he believes a map is useful because of what is *not* on it. A map that seeks to put everything on it is just this, he told me, gesturing around to indicate the world around us, real life. That kind of map “is an asymptote,” a line that continues to approach a curve but never meets it. But a map

becomes useful once it leaves information out. To Engle, transcription should be used as a map, the way a violinist does not pull mature music off a page of sheet music, rather they bring an enormous amount of knowledge *to* the page in order to produce mature music. One cannot just learn to read music, open up the book, read the notes and be good to go, according to Engle. One must learn the physicality of fiddling first, then notation can be helpful to a fiddler. This regard for the function of notation of course points to differences in approach between Engle and Beisswenger: Engle's primary concern is learning, whereas Beisswenger is perhaps more oriented toward documenting. The two are not mutually exclusive, but the outcomes are divergent.

### *Pitch*

Most old-time fiddle tunes are widely interpreted through the lens of the western 12-note chromatic scale, a collection of 12 equidistant semitones that make up an octave. As a non-fretted instrument, the fiddle has the capacity to produce more notes than that scale represents, and transcribers approach notating these differences in a variety of ways. In these three examples, we see three different approaches. Engle does not address the existence of non-standard notes in his staff transcription, instead marking the nearest equivalent note. In practice, use of his staff notation would be paired with close listening to the recording, and he acknowledges that there are numerous instances where Tommy Jarrell would not anchor a note in any one way, but he has chosen not to take on the task of transcribing those instances.

To do so requires amending standard western notation, and we see an example of this in the AFT transcription. Beisswenger has used slanted lines to indicate slides in the 3<sup>rd</sup> measure and 5<sup>th</sup> measure (see Figure 9). This implies that the note starts lower than the one printed, and arrives at the printed note over the course of playing it. In the 5<sup>th</sup> measure, for example, the note

starts below a B-natural, and slides into a B-natural over the course of playing the note. The slanted line does not indicate how far the slide moves (how much lower than a B-natural does Jarrell start that note?), but for a single eighth note a reader might confidently assume it cannot start too far away.

Another pitch-related amendment in the AFT transcription is the use of arrows, as seen in measures 7, 9, and 10 of “Devil in the Strawstack” (see Figure 9). These arrows indicate where a note is actually played higher or lower than the note printed, but not higher or lower enough to justify transcribing a half-step difference. In the second measure of the B-part, for example, there is a G-sharp that’s marked with a down arrow, indicating that note is closest to a G-sharp but is lower than that. As a reader and player, these arrows had me contemplating the difference between a G-natural played sharp and a G-sharp played flat. Choosing to notate it one way or the other does change how I hear the tune as I read it, and how I would approach playing the note as marked with an arrow; it feels physically different to overshoot versus undershoot a note, even if my ultimate finger placement is comparable. The inclusion of slanted lines to indicate pitch movement and arrows to indicate microtones (smaller units than the 12-note chromatic scale and staff allow) make for a much more nuanced tonal understanding of Tommy Jarrell’s “Devil in the Strawstack.”

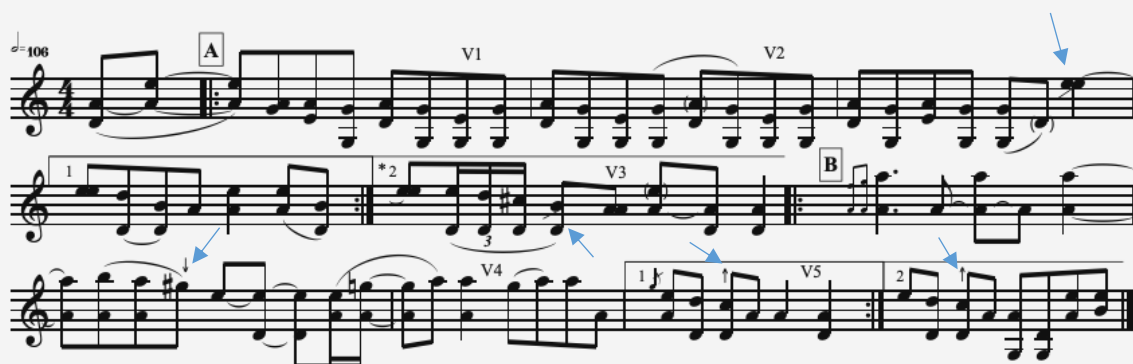


Figure 9. AFT symbols: slanted lines to indicate slides and arrows to indicate nonstandard pitch

Milliner and Koken do not acknowledge microtones in their transcriptions, so their transcription reads similarly to Engle's in that sense. They differ in a few spots: in Engle's second measure, second half, he includes an additional G note which keeps the melody moving in consistent rhythm until the ending phrase, whereas in the MKC, the same section of the melody stays on a D note for a beat longer (see Figure 10). In the B-part, MKC adds a return to an A4 in the second beat grouping, whereas Engle's stays on the A5 (see Figure 11). In this instance, the AFT actually includes both notes, so perhaps Engle and MKC highlighted different aspects of the same sound, indicated more fully by AFT. I believe the return to the A4 is in fact more of an indication of a bow rocking movement than a significant melodic note, an idea I return to in the "Bowing" section below. The AFT version's inclusion of both notes is in line with their approach which includes all audible notes, rather than separating melodic content from supporting notes or double stops.



Figure 11. Engle (top) and MKC note choice



Figure 10. B-part note choice. From top:  
MKC, Engle, AFT

Though Milliner and Koken do not notate microtones or indicate them in their transcriptions, they do include mention of them in their book's introduction. They refer to such notes as "tweeners." These are the notes that may fall "in the cracks," they say, especially the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> notes of the scale, which they believe generally tend to be "more or less neutral, somewhere in between major and minor." Sometimes, they say, these notes tend to sound "more major or sharp," and sometimes "more minor or flat." They describe how these kinds of notes are prevalent in old time fiddling and even credit them with giving old-time fiddling its distinctive sound. In addressing their approach to notating pitch in their transcriptions they say:

"Modern notation is inadequate to accurately depict the exact pitch of the 'tweener' notes as well as slides into and out of certain notes. Out of necessity, we have transcribed these tones as if the pitch was either one note or the other (major or minor), knowing full well that if the transcription is played back exactly as written, or on a midi file, it will not approximate the sound achieved by the original fiddler. For this reason we strongly recommend listening to the original source recordings to get the true pitch and feeling that old-timers put into these tunes."<sup>121</sup>

Milliner and Koken's disclaimer is the same as most other old-time tunebooks, and common understanding among old-time participants: the transcription of a tune is not the same as the performance of a tune, and the community privileges the recording or live performance of a tune. Their discussion of "tweeners" also suggests their thinking about modal information as it pertains to old-time music, a theme more thoroughly explored in the "Modes and Key Signatures" section.

The MKC mentions "slides into and out of certain notes," which Beisswenger used slanted lines to indicate. It occurs to me that the very notion of sliding into or out of a note still implies a sense of tonal rootedness, that there is a clear destination in mind. In listening to the fiddling of Tommy Jarrell (and many other old-time fiddlers for that matter), there are many

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., vii.

instances where the motion of a pitch feels more defining than the arrival or departure from one. I have heard John Engle echo this sentiment, and demonstrate it masterfully, where some passages in Jarrell's playing are so full of wiggle and swerve, that to even pick a "note" sometimes feels inappropriate. Engle would encourage me to isolate the factors at play: the fingers of the left hand are doing one thing and the bow and the left arm are up to another. In transcription, we look for measurable units, most often grounded by either pitch or rhythm, and sometimes one dictates the other, but functionally those two forces are operating separately.

Shen, in his discussion of the displacement of Chinese words by western-derived terminology, uses his term "sound bodies" to refer to a feeling of a basic pitch that cannot simply be referred to as "note" or "tone": "A sound body combines pitch with timbral and dynamic changes."<sup>122</sup> A listener will feel there is a clear divergence from a basic pitch, and in fact a performer may use these changes intentionally in giving "life" to the pitch. This echoes what I've encountered with many old-time musicians who believe pitch to be far more nuanced in the old-time music tradition, and to play a tune "too clean" strips it of some vibrancy. I believe all three transcribers might relate with this idea of divergence intentionally giving life to pitch, and alternative conceptions like "sound bodies" may prove helpful for future old-time transcriptions and other means of transmission. These ideas about pitch are also connected to notions of modality, as explored below.

### *Modes and Key Signatures*

At its simplest, the term "modal" is often employed by old-time musicians to refer to tunes that they would not classify as clearly major or minor, or that are considered darker and resonant. Dominant understanding of the word "modal" is that it references a system of seven

<sup>122</sup> Shen, "FACING THE PREDICAMENT OF WORDLESSNESS: WHEN WE SPEAK OF CERTAIN MUSICAL SOUNDS," 23.

scales known as the Greek, Church, or medieval modes. These modes make use of the same western chromatic 12-note scale, and each presents a different arrangement of intervals within an octave. In traditional music settings, I've heard modes described as "families of notes" that a melody may pull from. Of the seven Greek modes, Ionian, Dorian, Mixolydian, and Aeolian are the four most commonly found in old-time music.<sup>123</sup>

There is a precedent for using modes as a means of musical analysis of traditional music, most notably by folksong scholars like Cecil Sharp and Samuel P. Bayard. But early work related to modes did not migrate to the participants of old-time music. Musician and scholar Mark Simos identified a few reasons why that could be, including the scholarship's initial focus on ballad singing rather than tune playing, as well as the use of modes for facilitating analysis and categorization rather than emphasizing interpretation and performance.<sup>124</sup>

As for dealing with modes in these focus transcriptions, the MCK mentions briefly its introduction that the book includes many styles of fiddling, "from lively breakdowns and reels to beautiful stark and lonely sounding tunes in archaic modes."<sup>125</sup> They also say that for "non standard" keys or scales (tunes not in major G, D, C, A, Bb, E, F), the authors decided to use key signatures that reflect a tune's tonic, regardless of mode. This means the authors were making some judgement calls about whether a tune was in a "minor" key or in some other way "modal." Devil in the Strawstack, for example, is given a key signature with no sharps and flats, implying it is in the key of A minor (relative minor of C major). But the chart in the back of the book states the key as "A modal" (they use a broad "modal" classification in the indexes). In their

<sup>123</sup> Mark Simos, "No Knotting the Chord: Harmonizing the Modes (Part 1)" (2005).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Milliner and Koken, *The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes*, iii.



intro they state, “if a tune actually is in A minor... we use the A minor key signature.” So there is some discrepancy in their classification of keys and key signatures.

The AFT makes a broad effort to classify every tune with a Greek mode, including ample clarification about which scale degrees do what over the course of the tune and how that effects the modal classification. For “Devil in the Strawstack,” Beisswenger labels the tune as being in the key of A using a hexatonic minor scale, clarified as having no 6<sup>th</sup> note, some higher 3<sup>rd</sup>s and 7<sup>th</sup>s. In other words, the tune uses six notes (it does not use the 6<sup>th</sup> note of the scale) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> notes of the scale are variable, sometimes lower and sometimes higher and sometimes more ambiguous. In the narrative notes below, he states the following:

“I chose to call this a Dorian hexatonic tune (no sixth), but the third and seventh scale notes are unstable, so one could make a case for calling it a hexatonic major tune. Better yet, one could conduct a complex analysis of the scale changes, especially in the modal B part. In the second measure of that part, Jarrell shifts from a G sharp to a G natural, while playing an A drone though most of the measure. Interesting stuff!”

What a perfect encapsulation of Beisswenger’s enthusiasm for detailed analysis and invitation for further exploration of the nuance of Jarrell’s performance. The Dorian mode uses a lowered 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> note of the scale, but Beisswenger indicates that given the instability of those two indicator notes, the mode could also be said to be perhaps Mixolydian or Ionian. Given that the only difference between the Dorian and Aeolian modes is the 6<sup>th</sup> (lowered in Aeolian, raised in Dorian), it is unclear to me that this tune is any more firmly one or the other. Perhaps because the Dorian mode shares a closer affiliation with the major, Ionian? His invitation for a “complex analysis of the scale changes” could very well be taken up by readers who share his interest in this type of investigation of old-time music.

Engle, like the MKC and AFT, tends to choose his key signatures based upon the tonic of the tune. In this case, he elected to transcribe using no sharps or flats, indicating the tune shares less in common with a typical A-Major key/mode than an A-minor.

Deeper understanding of the classic modes, as Beisswenger's transcription suggests, could lead to greater appreciation of "wild notes" and "tweeners." It could also lead to greater academic grounding of old-time music discussions. But there still exists a gap between the average application of the term "modal" within old-time communities, and potentially also limitations in interpreting the pitch choices represented in old-time fiddle through the lens of classic mode frameworks. Engle, for example, devotes little time to pinning down modes or key signatures, and eagerly points out instances in Jarrell's fiddling where there is little to no "commitment" to one note or another (as mentioned in the "Pitch" section of this chapter). Modal information, for Engle, would fall into the category of information that happens beyond the written transcription. Many old-time musicians would also point out that none of the fiddlers whose performances are being transcribed thought of their tunes as being classified through a particular Greek mode; depending on your goal, it may be counterintuitive or even obstructive.

I appreciate Beisswenger's inclusion of scale degree details, which feel more precise and illustrative than a mode or minor/major label alone. Musician Jody Stecher has spoken about the relationship between mode and old-time music, and he demonstrates a similar approach to Beisswenger's in his description of Roscoe Holcomb's rendition of "East Virginia Blues:"

"Arranged as an ascending scalar sequence Holcomb's East Virginia mode starts with a neutral 7 below the octave—it's between F natural and F sharp—and then it ascends to home plate, G, the tonic. Then comes an unstable neutral 3rd on the G string starting at the third fret and gracefully ascending to a point a little higher, matching Holcomb's upwardly mobile vocal 3rd. Now comes major 3, sharp 4, 5, and finally flat 7. The song never reaches the octave, and the 7ths are less than an octave apart, like you hear in old highland Scottish music. It's not rocket surgery. Just a typical example of American modality. Trying to decide whether this arrangement of tones is Dorian, Mixolydian or

Aeolian is like deciding if a duck is a root vegetable, Tuesday, or three uncles. It's nonsense, the reality doesn't fit the categories offered."<sup>126</sup>

Stecher goes on to articulate a new approach to understanding modality, specific to American folk music and that acknowledges its roots. He also provides an analogy through the contemporary Greek notion of modes:

“American modal music is not restricted to a particular banjo tuning or scale. Our modal melodies don't conform to the modal scales of the European conservatory—dorian, mixolydian, hyper-diaper-neo-phrygian, and all that—those labels don't fit American modal music; they weren't designed to describe American sonic realities. Our modal music is derived in part from the vernacular modal traditions of northern Europe and of Islamic Africa. I think there's a Native American component too... We have a modal reality in America but no organized modal system and no names for our modes. Every now and then a phrase coincides with a Hyper Diaper mode but our tunes generally can fit those categories only with the assistance of an industrial strength shoe horn. When Greek musicians—the ones living today, not the ancient Dorians, Ionians, and Frisbyterians—when these living musicians talk about modes they use the word *dhromi*, meaning ‘roads.’ That's very apt for American modal music. Roads or pathways. American modal melodies sometimes make round trip journeys that return by a different path than taken heading out. Follow the road of Ashley's Cuckoo and you'll see what I mean.”<sup>127</sup>

Engle agrees with Stecher's observations about American music, and expands on the idea that the music is microtonal: “The pitches are not only microtonal, but often moving targets.”<sup>128</sup> The range of approaches to modes and key signatures just within the three focus examples points to great potential for reconsideration and expansion of modality. Perhaps Stecher's ideas could lead to a model for future attempts at modal analysis through the new lens of “American modality.”

### *Bowing*

The AFT and MKC provide no bowing markings, pointing to a general privileging of left-hand information over right. Beisswenger states: “I didn't include detailed bowing because I

<sup>126</sup> Roy Andrade, “Interview with Jody Stecher,” *Banjo Newsletter*, no. August (2009).

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

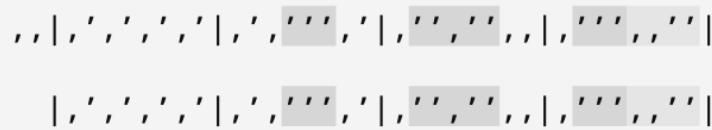
<sup>128</sup> Engle, “Email Interview with Author.”

found it impossible to determine, but I did include slurs, as I heard them.” Milliner and Koken underscore the difficulty of deducing bowing in their introduction: “the bowing used by the fiddler is not something we are able to discern exactly by listening to the recordings. In many cases, it’s hard enough to just hear what the notes are, much less try to figure out which way the fiddler’s bow is going.” They are starting with the notes, and believe that “if one is to play the exact notes which the source fiddler played, one’s bowing might more closely follow that fiddler’s bowing.”<sup>129</sup> One instance where the notes could be said to suggest bowing is in the start of the MKC B-part where they include two A4s that would require the bow to dip down to the A-string and then return to the E-string. As printed, a reader might assume these notes are played with separate bow strokes, which Engle’s transcription does not support, but the idea of bow motion is definitely contained in that type of melodic moment.

John Engle’s approach argues the opposite from MKC: if one plays the exact bowings (and therefore the rhythms) which the source fiddler played, one’s notes might more closely follow that fiddler’s notes. Engle’s approach supports the notion that notes may in fact “fall into place” once the right arm technique is in place. Engle’s current system of commas/apostrophes depict bow stroke timing, direction, and duration, “with a way to see the rhythmic pieces responsible for giving the physical feel to a passage of bowing.” Each up bow gets a higher mark, each down bow gets a lower mark, and each beat is marked, so he might use multiple marks in a row in the higher or lower position to indicate a multi-beat note or a slur of multiple notes together in one bow stroke (see Figure 12).

<sup>129</sup> Milliner and Koken, *The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes*, viii.

A



B



Figure 12. Engle's bowing transcription, with "roots" shaded

In addition to depicting this bow stroke and duration information, Engle has also spent a good amount of time identifying distinct rhythms or patterns in these bow strokes, which he visually marks by shading or coloring them. He calls these rhythms roots, borrowing from the linguistic idea of roots (the part of a word that remains when all affixes are taken away). Roots are like “rhythmic words,” Engle said. All roots start and end with even duration strokes and contain “up-bowing” (where an up-bow coincides with a downbeat). An even duration stroke turns your bow around, changes your orientation, and therefore all “rhythms start and end with even duration strokes” according to Engle. The exception is the up-bow dotted-quarter stroke (three bow markings in a row, which we see abundantly in “Devil in the Strawstack”). Engle does not mark the down-bow dotted-quarter stroke because only the up-bow version has a “distinct feel;” it is a syncopated stroke, as it starts on the upbeat and moves through the downbeat. The down-bow dotted-quarter “doesn’t toss you at all,” Engle says. While there could theoretically be hundreds of roots, Engle asserts that 99% of fiddling is going to contain less than ten roots.

In Engle's bowing transcription of "Devil in the Strawstack," we see three roots: the dotted-quarter rhythm ( ' ' '), a quarter-quarter rhythm ( , , ' ' '), and a quarter-eighth-quarter rhythm ( ' ' , ' ' '). In initially viewing these transcriptions, I was struck by the visual cleanness of the page. Patterns are quite easily identifiable: The A-part uses the exact same bowings for both lines. The B-part nearly does except for, significantly, the end of the last phrase. Whereas the first three lines of the song end with the same two rhythms, the last line breaks the pattern to signal the end of the form. In this way, viewing bowing only can actually signal information about the phrases, form, and/or variations of a tune.

Another pattern that stands out is all the dotted-quarter rhythms in a row contained in the B-part. I looked at this transcription before being well-acquainted with playing the melodic content of the tune, and it impacted how I hummed the B-part of the tune to myself: instead of hearing it defined more by where the E5s happen (as if speaking the eighth-note beats of that measure: "ONE-and-two-and-THREE-and-FOUR-and") I heard it through the rhythms of where the bow changed direction ("ONE-and-two-AND-three-and-FOUR-and"), a subtle but important distinction. This is an example of a place where using a bowing transcription in tandem with staff notation can be of benefit: Engle's staff notation provides an accent on the 3<sup>rd</sup> beat and the MKC transcription includes a note change, so even though the bowing transcription states that a single longer bow stroke spans those notes, in referencing the staff notation one can deduce that the bow is required to do more than a flat, linear stroke.

This notion of beyond-linear bowing is of utmost importance to Engle. And while deductions like the one just mentioned are possible, the vast majority of the nuanced bow work of a fiddler like Tommy Jarrell is still impossible to represent in these transcription forms. Engle states clearly that his transcriptions "contain virtually no detail, nor guidance for getting mature

physical sound off of the page.” Instead, he says, “they function as a map for learning the notes and the strokes, and then provide something like a wire armature for filling out with material addressed during instruction.” An armature, he explained, is something a sculptor might attach clay to and build off of. In this case, transcription helps pin information to where it is happening in the tune, providing navigation points that could be note groupings or stroke groupings or anything else that helps a fiddler stay oriented. In his own use of transcriptions, the armature of transcription supports the kinesthetic parts of playing the tune, the bow strokes and physical movements, without which the music and transcriptions would hold no purpose for Engle.

During my conversations with Engle he made use of many analogies to explain his thinking, like the “armature” one. A more enduring analogy was “the floor.” At the time of our sessions, Engle was energized by some discussions he had had with Ira Bernstein who specializes in traditional forms of American dance. Engle explained how he’d learned from Ira that dancers remember floors. They remember particularly good ones, bad ones, memorable ones. But a dancer’s focus is not the floor. Most old-time tunes, Engle says, are like dance floors. Some are bad and he’d rather not play them again (like concrete floors). Most are fine, and he can go out and work with the bow and have fun. Some tunes are remarkable, and he loves them, and the bowing feels exquisite (like sprung floors might feel to a dancer). But they are all fundamentally floors. There are things a floor needs to be and things it does not. To Engle, most transcriptions portray note-based information that to him read like paying excessive attention to the floor.

He supported the floor analogy with another: a melody is like the canvas of a painting. We are grateful for the canvas because without it we would have a puddle of paint; we need something to support the paint, but we should not overvalue the canvas. To him, the floor or the

canvas is the part that hardly matters, or is at least not the part of fiddling that makes him want to do it again once he's finished. Engle developed these transcriptions to help himself dig deeper into the mechanics of what made old-time music appealing to him, and in doing so, he also developed a unique perspective on the relationship of sound and movement. He hears movement in sound, and found a way to better represent that on paper.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has articulated the key moments of similarity and difference among three transcription approaches of the same performance in an effort to address what they can tell us about the nature of transcription in old-time music. Some of these key moments include how the AFT version provides abundant variations in contrast to the more streamlined core versions from Engle and the MKC that may reference different passes through the tune. Additionally, the MKC does not include bar lines, relying on beat groupings to indicate information to a reader, whereas Engle's and the AFT transcriptions use bar lines and part labels to divide sections. Engle additionally arranges the tune by phrase spatially. The analysis reveals a range of information types included or excluded including tempo markings, part labels, authorship, modality, and additional musical or contextual information. The transcriptions demonstrate a range of approaches to double stops as well, from notating all double stops to selective double stops to no double stops; the selective double stops in the MKC transcription in particular end up suggesting some bowing/right arm movements despite the minimal explicit bowing information notated. These transcriptions each present a different way of addressing non-standard pitch in old-time music, including the use of non-western notation symbols like arrows or lines in the AFT version. Engle has provided not just an amendment to standard western notation but an entirely new system with his bowing transcription method, centering a tune transcription around very



different information than the AFT and MKC versions.

In Chapter 5 I ask how this evidence from the musicological analysis reflects the intentions of the authors, and I begin with a conversation on identifying purpose. As mentioned in Chapter 2, while transcriptions may communicate a great array of information, they always succeed at presenting the underlying values of the transcriber. Shen reminds us that “the description achieved through notation is itself actually a narrative about the musical sound.”<sup>130</sup> And Nettl highlights how the decision-making process reveals how a transcriber prioritizes information when he states, “a type of notation must select from the acoustic phenomena those which the notator considers most essential.”<sup>131</sup> Given that transcription represents a reduction of sound to visual form, this comparative transcription analysis helps reveal how Milliner and Koken, Beisswenger, and Engle go about prioritizing information, and how their different approaches to transcribing the same old-time fiddle tune can reflect underlying purposes.

<sup>130</sup> Shen, “FACING THE PREDICAMENT OF WORDLESSNESS: WHEN WE SPEAK OF CERTAIN MUSICAL SOUNDS,” 26.

<sup>131</sup> Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*, 98.

## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

In this chapter I return to the questions that guided this inquiry: What might the analysis of these transcriptions tell us about the nature of transcription or their underlying purposes? How could these different approaches to transcribing the same tune reflect the intentions of the author, and what are those intentions? And what does this suggest about how information is prioritized? Detailed analysis of the transcriptions created by Beisswenger, Engle, and Milliner and Koken, reveals key choices that indicate certain fundamental purposes behind each transcription. This chapter begins by evaluating each of those transcriptions through the lens of purpose, examining what the analyses from Chapter 4 can tell us about the underlying intentions and functions of the transcriptions. As detailed in Chapter 2, some of the many purposes of transcription that scholars have identified include: tracing sources or demonstrating change (Geortzen, Quigley); demonstrating evidence of the existence of a certain type of music (Nettl); presenting and describing information without theorizing about it (Stumpf); making a record of a particular performance (Hopkins); facilitating comparison and revealing a transcriber's bias (Hopkins); making visible oral or aural transmission (Knauff); preservation, memorialization, and/or mediation (Shelemay); and, most significantly, prescriptive versus descriptive transcriptions (Charles Seeger) including subcategories of descriptive purposes like demonstrating the details of a single performance, the essence of a piece, or the ideal performance of that piece (Nettl).

After a discussion of purpose, I then explore additional questions this research raises and directions it might lead, including an investigation of some online possibilities as they relate to old-time tunes and transcriptions. I close with space devoted to John Engle and his thoughts on approaching fiddling from a kinesthetic perspective. This section sheds light on Engle not just as a transcriber, but also as musician and person, identities which are inextricably linked and are reflected in his transcriptions. The world of old-time music is multifaceted, and it is important to

consider the range of perspectives and ideologies that comprise it. John's is an important, thought-provoking voice.

### *Identifying Purpose*

An underlying assumption of the MKC book seems to be a fear that the older versions of tunes may be lost, indicating a guiding purpose for their transcriptions is preservation. They state as much in their introduction: "We feel that it's important to document the old melodies while the recordings of them still exist. So it is essential not only musically, but also historically to transcribe the tunes with as much fidelity as possible to the original recordings, and point each transcription to its particular recording and artist."<sup>132</sup> In analyzing their transcriptions, I am left wondering what they mean by fidelity, because their transcriptions do not represent particularly detail-rich versions of tunes. Perhaps they are instead committed to documenting the elusive "spirit" of the tunes, which places them in what Nettl identifies as one type of descriptive transcription: capturing the essence of a tune.

In examining Milliner and Koken's transcription process, however, it seems they endeavored to provide a record of particular performances of tunes, a different type of purpose as articulated by Hopkins.<sup>133</sup> As access to field recordings and reissues of 78s and LPs became more available in the United States, the MKC authors compared Milliner's transcribed "festival versions" to the "original" versions and were struck by the amount of difference. The MKC introduction implies they felt bothered by this trend, and compelled to better represent the details of earlier versions of tunes. Each of their transcriptions is clearly connected to one recording of one artist playing the tune, but the transcriptions at times still feel a bit generalized. I find myself stretching to justify their transcriptions as "essences" of those original performances. But it is

<sup>132</sup> Milliner and Koken, *The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes*, iv.

<sup>133</sup> Hopkins, "The Purposes of Transcription."

possible, as Ruth Crawford Seeger and Jeff Todd Titon did, to strive for a kind of compromise between stripped-down outlines and cumbersome detailed versions in an effort to communicate enough to perpetuate a tune through time. Their book is a wonderful reference for locating source recordings across a wide range of old-time fiddle styles, and in that way it can help members of the old-time music community connect more with versions of tunes the authors fear will be abandoned.

Beisswenger is all about celebrating the richness and complexity of old-time fiddling, as his transcriptions demonstrate with their use of detailed melodic information, double stops, variations, new symbols to illustrate non-standard pitch, and detailed musical notes in narrative form below each transcription. Beisswenger wants his transcriptions to include “everything [he] could think of,” and even wishes he could “see more detail” in future transcriptions of old-time fiddle tunes. This places him firmly in Seeger’s “descriptive” category of transcription: endeavoring to provide a thorough and objective account of what happened in a particular musical performance for analysis, “presumably without making (or accepting) judgements as to the relative significance of events and units.”<sup>134</sup> Just like Bartók’s famous transcriptions of European folk songs, Beisswenger’s are similarly descriptive and as a result they are also at times difficult to interpret.

Of course no descriptive transcription can capture every bit of information about music, despite Beisswenger’s best efforts, and he acknowledges this; in discussing what makes existing transcriptions more or less successful, Beisswenger says that he has seen examples of transcriptions with mistakes, and that “some highly-simplified transcripts don’t capture some important subtleties, although,” he adds, “no transcription can capture all subtleties.” He even

<sup>134</sup> Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 79.

goes so far as to say that his intense commitment to detail may not be shared among other transcribers: “I think I’m almost alone in believing that including as much detail as possible is good. I’ve been surprised to find that many transcribers are actually opposed to detailed transcriptions, perhaps because they think they go against the spirit of the music; I’m not sure.”<sup>135</sup>

Is it possible that each of the transcriptions of “Devil in the Strawstack” endeavor to capture the elusive “spirit” of the tune, and simply arrive there by different means? I believe so. But while each transcriber certainly feels they are working toward the proliferation of a particular performance of this tune, their presentations and prioritizations of information are quite different.

At their core, Engle’s transcriptions are in essence prescriptive; like Nettl’s analogy of a pianist learning a new mazurka by Chopin, Engle intends his transcriptions to give readers “an accurate idea of the specific sound of a song only if they already know in general the kind of sound to be expected, if they are already acquainted with the style. Otherwise, it serves only as a vehicle for abstract perception of style characteristics.”<sup>136</sup> I am not confident that John would even posit that transcriptions provide a means of perceiving style characteristics.

Engle’s transcriptions are not intended to imply a single correct way to play a tune, or to improve upon other transcriptions. Rather his transcriptions serve a new, focused purpose, one that no other transcriptions (that Engle or I are aware of) have served. In Engle’s words, his transcriptions provide support in learning “how the bow works, and encourage the use of both hands with equal intention.”<sup>137</sup> I would add that they also provide a new framework for

<sup>135</sup> Beisswenger, “Email to Author.”

<sup>136</sup> Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 78.

<sup>137</sup> Engle, “Email Interview with Author.”

interpreting old-time fiddling, radically reassessing the way a listener prioritizes aural information.

For example, I now find myself checking how I privilege some information over other. A small instance from the writing of this project: I had originally described Engle's process of creating teaching materials for beginning fiddle students as creating simpler melodies and corresponding bowings. But upon reflection I realized that Engle could have just as likely (probably more likely) begun by streamlining the bowings and adjusting the melodic content to correspond. Additionally, in my learning of new fiddle tunes, I have found solutions to tricky sections by reframing through the lens of a two-hand approach: what is my left hand up to, what is my right hand up to, how do they interact to change the outcome? I have also tried to more directly assess my physical experience of playing old-time fiddle in a way that I have not heard other artists articulate (though it perhaps relates to the mindful practices of approaches like the Alexander Technique). What tunes feel best to play and why? Am I drawn to particular bowing styles or patterns because of how they make me feel? When I encounter instances in tunes that do not feel physically intuitive, I feel better prepared to sit with them and investigate why. In my teaching, I am armed now with a motivating example of how one can in fact learn to hear bowing in recordings, and that sometimes starting from bowings first can yield more nuanced, satisfying results.

I have also found important takeaways from the MKC and AFT transcriptions. Chiefly the MKC and AFT books provide a wealth of contextual information, on the artists, recordings, keys, tunings, forms, variations, and use of drones or double stops. Beisswenger's work is meticulous and thought-provoking, and I especially appreciate his "musical notes" which clearly invite a reader to unravel the nuance of individual old-time fiddle performances. His specificity

is unparalleled in modern tunebooks, and the book's geographic scope is both helpfully regional, and encompassing and thorough. Milliner and Koken took on a massive project in creating their collection, and they have produced a valuable tool for perpetuating a greater number of tunes in a more approachable, readable form. Both books are helpful additions to the pool of old-time fiddle tunebooks, extending the field's depth and breadth.

Engle's transcriptions, in contrast, are a more direct invitation to rethink one's approach to transcription and fiddling in the first place. This rethinking could play a role in the transmission of old-time music, particularly for educators who already make use of transcription in their teaching. In an era flush with more musicians approaching old-time music with a background in western classical training, perhaps presenting an alternative mode of interpreting visual information could better support a type of old-time fiddling that favors non-linear bowing. Engle's transcriptions are not representative of tradition; he invented them, and while his thoughtful study of old-time fiddling can surely be said to have yielded detailed results that honor sounds of the past, his message is not based in the language of preservation, accuracy, or purity. He developed these transcriptions to help himself dig deeper into the mechanics of what made old-time music appealing to him, and in doing so, he also developed a unique perspective on the relationship of sound and movement. He hears movement in sound, and found a way to better represent that on paper.

### *Beyond This Research*

This thesis invites additional musicological analysis of information like harmony and chords. Milliner and Koken remark on their decision not to include chord information, stating it was (of course) too subjective: "our personal chordal preferences are somewhat 'classic' in style, and again we recommend listening to the original recordings. We have chosen not to impose our

subjective preferences upon the reader.”<sup>138</sup> Given how relevant chord choice is in contemporary old-time music communities and the range of approaches people take, how might transcriptions address the presence of chords and harmonization choices in source recordings?

While not within the scope of this project, issues raised here lead to questions about which tunes are and are not chosen to be transcribed in the first place and the influence of transcription on the old-time music tradition through time. Milliner and Koken acknowledge that the selection of tunes included in the MKC “when it comes right down to it... was entirely subjective. Some really wonderful tunes have been omitted. We apologize for that, but we had to stop somewhere, and we acknowledge that this collection of 1404 fiddle tunes is just the tip of the iceberg.”<sup>139</sup> The AFT is geographically defined, and John Engle’s transcriptions are created to address his own tastes and the needs of his students. But in a broader sense, I am curious about which fiddlers and which tunes have been transcribed and which have not, and what effect that has on the old-time music community through time. Just as early field recorders and song collectors displayed some bias in their choice of sources, what biases exist in contemporary documentation? Furthermore, what impact has this had on our understanding of what constitutes old-time music? How might the community’s identity and repertoire be different had certain tunes or artists been included or omitted?

Similarly, this research could invite analysis of how transcriptions influence a listener’s experience with the sound. How do transcriptions impact a reader’s interpretation of the recording? How might a transcription or contextual information impact a reader’s perspective on the artist? Writers and transcribers craft a narrative, and inevitably shape how a consumer hears and thinks about the music. Charles Wolfe commented on how record collectors and

<sup>138</sup> Milliner and Koken, *The Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes*, viii.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, v.



discographies “[impose] on the Old-Time music of the 1920s a cultural aspect of the present day: the tendency to see the recording artist as a hero, as personality, as ‘star’” (1975: 66). Might transcriptions try and do the same thing, by highlighting certain performances or presenting them in a certain light?

This research offers significant implications for old-time music education. Given the growing presence of formal fiddle music instruction in North American institutions of higher learning,<sup>140</sup> this study makes room for more in depth study of the usefulness of transcription in teaching. Additionally, in learning how these particular transcribers went about the act of transcribing, I am left curious about how transcription-related technology has changed over time, and the impact that has had on both the process of transcribing old-time tunes and the reading/practicing process. One aspect of the relationship between transcription and technology is the internet, and the many possibilities online tools and communities offer for presenting more comprehensive information about old-time tunes.

### *Online Transcription Possibilities*

Each transcriber examined here expresses the many inherent limitations of transcriptions to capture as much information as they would like, and the fundamental reduction that transcription represents. Inevitably, they all say, their transcriptions must be used in conjunction with close listening and practice, otherwise they may prove inadequate or even misleading. Each addresses this issue in their own way by adapting standard methods or creating non-standard ones: AFT’s slanted lines for slides and arrows for non-standard pitch placement, MKC’s omission of bar lines and part labels, John Engle’s bowing notation system. These adaptations invite further discussion of other potential adaptations. Given the major technological changes

<sup>140</sup> Nathaniel Jay Olson, “THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF FIDDLING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THREE CASES” (Columbia University, 2014).

that have already contributed to the shifting of transcription methods (especially the ability to slow down recordings, alter pitch, play back digital notation, and general widespread access to more recordings), how might technology continue to alter the possibilities for old-time fiddle tune transcription?

One possibility is the use of interactive media to present musical information. In “Creating Online Appalachia,” a review of “Appalachia-intersected, mediated output,” Christopher Miller comments on the rapidly expanding opportunities for not just media consumption, but also for media generation and interaction. For students and scholars of Appalachian Studies, the tools Miller mentions are tremendous, particularly for making landscape and place-based experiences virtually accessible through real-time visuals and historical mapping. He reminds us that we have much easier access to fun, adaptable data processing tools today, as well as opportunities for greater community building and community- and individual-generated content that can reach broader audiences: “Thematic databases of individuals in our communities, past and present, provide us not only with the opportunity to know ourselves better but also to expand the boundaries of who is known to the outside world.”<sup>141</sup> He's speaking primarily of documentation and network efforts like the Discover Freedmen project, Many Many Women, and the Smithsonian Transcription Center, and is advocating that Appalachia make its presence known on such online platforms. Miller's review is an invitation to make use of the tools mentioned and to suggest more.

“Never have we been so compelled to be so very active in creating beyond consumption,” Miller says.<sup>142</sup> This distinction between creating and consuming is noteworthy, and supported by the online world of old-time music. User-generated content is alive and well in online forums

<sup>141</sup> Christopher Miller, “Creating Online Appalachia,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2017): 150.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 141.

like mudcat.org (especially their Digital Tradition Folk Song Database), the Traditional Tune Archive (tunearch.org), and instrument-specific communities like FiddleHangout.com and BanjoHangout.com. Facebook also hosts a number of groups devoted to various aspects of old-time music, and Instagram has accounts devoted to sharing old-time music as well as being the site of numerous hashtags that allow users to connect related content (e.g. #FiddleTuneFriday #OldTime #OldTimeFiddle or participatory hashtags like George Jackson's #DorrigoChallenge). These platforms allow for a gathering and exchange of information, sometimes linking to transcriptions, and often providing contextual information about tunes and their sources. These spaces already allow for a potentially more nuanced, multifaceted conversation about old-time fiddle tunes. And considering them in conjunction with Miller's survey of resources points to greater possibility for telling the stories of old-time tunes and for those stories to reach more people.

Titon in his exploration of hypertext suggests another possibility for telling nuanced, nonlinear stories, the kind of nonlinearity that some old-time tunes require. Unlike conventional books, where one page follows another, hypertexts are nonlinear. Multiple writing spaces can be viewed at one time, and "the reader is always offered multiple pathways through the information, and the reading will be different depending on which pathways are chosen and what is read and not read."<sup>143</sup> Hypertext is a useful and exciting tool for researchers and learners, and I wonder how it might interact with the notion of tune transcriptions. Given the range of approaches we have now seen in transcribing the same performance of a tune, it seems that there could be need of a kind of transcription that allows for multiple interpretations (aligning with Clifford's notion of dialogic truth, as mentioned in Chapter 3). Hypertext may provide space for this: "An unusual

<sup>143</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, "Text," in *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*, ed. Burt Feintuch (University of Illinois Press, 2003), 90.

feature of this hypertext is that it offers the reader opposite conclusions without resolving the difference, thereby modeling some of the ambiguity a researcher faces.”<sup>144</sup> Nonlinearity is precisely what some old-time tunes demand. Disputes over timing, pitch, variation, and relation could be given space to exist (and perhaps not resolve). Hypertext and other involvement with online tools addresses the call within the field of Appalachian Studies to adopt technologies and adapt to trends in digital texts and online teaching.<sup>145</sup>

### *Why Transcriptions Matter*

My initial definition of transcription as a “reduction of sound to visual form” has been demonstrated to be true through the analysis of the “Devil in the Strawstack” transcriptions. The fact that there are multiple iterations based on the same aural information confirms that there is a range of information un- or underrepresented in each, and that none is complete. So yes, each of the analyzed transcriptions represents a reduction of sound to paper. But as written resources, they overwhelmingly represent an abundance, not a lack. They offer a reader a wealth of information as a launching place, or they provide a lens for analysis, a means of comparison when placed in context with other tunes by the same composer, from the same region or time or tuning or key etc. Or they may expedite the learning process, facilitating greater exploration of the un-transcribed performance nuances.

Nettl believes that ethnomusicologists could be considered distinct from other types of scholars—even “superpeople”—because of their use of transcription: “In transcription, the ethnomusicologist presents himself or herself as a kind of superperson, able to control and make sense of a plethora of previously inexplicable sound with a set of extremely demanding

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>145</sup> Phillip J. Obermiller and Shaunna L. Scott, “Studying Appalachia: Critical Reflections,” in *Studying Appalachian Studies: Making the Path by Walking*, ed. Chad Berry, Phillip J. Obermiller, and Shaunna L. Scott (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 141–167.

techniques.”<sup>146</sup> While this is perhaps a generous description that leans on a mystique surrounding transcription methodology, it is true that transcription has long been considered a crucial and complex tenet in the work of ethnomusicologists.<sup>147</sup>

And it remains a crucial tenet in the work of old-time music participants as well, as transcriptions provide a means of perpetuating tradition and cultural knowledge. In this way, transcriptions of old-time fiddle tunes are part of powerful cultural work, which can play an important role in strengthening communities and grounding resistance and survival efforts. According to Guy and Candie Carawan and their exploration of nurturing cultural roots and creativity, “there is a tendency to underestimate the importance of cultural work, to feel that music and poetry, dance and humor, will naturally be a part of community life and attempts to challenge oppression or inequality. In our experience, this is not the case. The seeds for cultural expression are there, but cultivating and nurturing those seeds are also necessary.”<sup>148</sup> It is important that such work is acknowledged and encouraged. Transcriptions and tunebooks have the capacity to support the nurturing of cultural expression.

Old-time is a complex, many-sided music, encompassing a range of instrumentation, styles, settings, and geographies. The approaches to transcribing its tunes are also varied, representing a variety of methodologies, symbols, priorities, and underlying purposes. It is important that discussion of the music and ways of transcribing it presents multiple voices, multiple perspectives on the same information. The examples presented here offer unique approaches to transcription, and each in their own way celebrates the particularities of old-time

<sup>146</sup> Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts*, 75.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>148</sup> Guy Carawan and Candie Carawan, “Sowing on the Mountain: Nurturing Cultural Roots and Creativity for Community Change,” in *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change*, ed. Stephen L. Fisher (Temple University Press, 1993), 260.

fiddling. Though transcription by nature presents inherent limitations in its ability to capture a performance, by putting multiple renditions of the same tune side by side we can see a greater array of information. This perspective encourages reconsidering how one listens to tunes, learns them, and documents them.

I choose to close with space devoted to John Engle and his thoughts on approaching fiddling from a kinesthetic perspective. Of the three transcription styles, John's required the most contextualizing. Because I was able to spend time with John in person to learn more about his transcriptions, I also gained greater insight into his thoughts on old-time music and fiddling more generally. Having gained this insight, I now find myself curious to learn more about Clare Milliner's, Walk Koken's, and Drew Beisswenger's larger guiding ideologies, a natural extension of this thesis. How do they approach their own relationship with old-time music and fiddling, and how might that be reflected in their transcriptions?

The following narrative sheds light on John not just as a transcriber, but also as musician and person, identities which are inextricably linked and are reflected in his transcriptions. His perspective reflects some of the themes of this thesis by questioning the purpose of transcribing, its relationship to old-time fiddling, how musicians choose to prioritize the information of a tune, and the highly personal nature of it all. The world of old-time music is multifaceted, and this thesis demonstrates just part of the range of perspectives and ideologies that comprise it.

### *John Engle on the "Feel Good"*

During one of our conversations I asked John if he thought it was important that more old-time fiddlers should approach fiddling from a kinesthetic perspective. He paused and told me that was a funny way to ask the question, and went on to disclose that he wasn't sure he believed it was important that anybody continue to play old-time fiddle in the first place. He seemed to

take a breath and a step back from that thought, explaining that he shies away from making claims of what is more or less important for other people. He simply stated “it’s why I continue to play.”<sup>149</sup> He plays because it feels good, and that is all there is in it for him. “The ability to sit down and feel good. Sometimes because I want to. Sometimes because I need to.”<sup>150</sup> If he is playing out, then he feels his role is to have learned how to sit down and feel good, and to try and fill the space with that “feel good.” For John, the feel good does not come from the melody, nor from the harmonies. It comes from the fact that the dance of fiddling feels good.

John believes rather than five senses, humans might only have one: touch. “That’s all there is,” he says.<sup>151</sup> Most people think of touch as picking up that paper or shaking someone’s hand, but if you are looking at something, light is touching your retina. When you hear something, sound waves touch your eardrum. Touch, John hypothesizes, sets up a movement, and that movement biologically is what sets up impulses that give you sensations. A melody touches us, it touches our eardrums, which is why we can hear melodies. But it is tiny, he says. So small we cannot really feel it. A melody might just show up in our head. You can have a very cerebral experience with a melody. You might experience emotional connections to it, but not physical ones. Harmony functions similarly. But rhythm—he firmly smacked his hand on his lap—you feel it, it is a physical, tangible experience. If you don’t feel it moving from the outside in, you might feel it moving from the inside out, and you feel it throughout your whole body. For example, if you move your right arm like you’re bowing a tune, you likely feel that motion elsewhere in your body. And your body, John says, cannot really tell the difference between sensation coming from the outside in or the inside out.<sup>152</sup>

<sup>149</sup> John Engle, “Interview with Author” (Mars Hill, NC, 2019).

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

Part of why John focuses so much on these physical aspects of fiddling is because he has an abundance of the cerebral; “I don’t need more of that,” he added.<sup>153</sup> John returned to my earlier question regarding the importance of approaching fiddling from this kinesthetic perspective and said: “It’s not just important, it’s the whole thing. That’s the dance you go out on the floor to do. The rest is just the floor.”<sup>154</sup>

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.



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