Folk music revivals in comparative perspective

Richard Blaustein

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Play It Like It Is
Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic

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About the author:

Richard Blaustein is Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee. He is also Coordinator of the Undergraduate Minor in Appalachian Studies and teaches Old Time Appalachian fiddle and banjo in the university's Bluegrass, Old Time and Country Music programme. His research interests include comparative studies of cultural revitalization movements and the development of organisations devoted to the preservation of traditional fiddle music.
There have been two major grassroots revivals of traditional fiddle music in the United States in the twentieth century. The first American fiddling revival occurred in the early 1920s. The country had just shifted from a military to a domestic consumer economy; the nation’s population for the first time in American history had become predominantly urban rather than rural; a revolutionary new African-American style, jazz, was driving all competitors out of the mainstream of the popular music field. Several folklorists, including Simon Bronner, Paul Wells, and myself, have written about the role of Henry Ford in promoting the revival of old-time fiddling and dancing during this period, but otherwise little is known about organized efforts to preserve traditional music in the twenties, other than research by Wayne Daniel’s dealing with the Atlanta fiddlers contests and the Georgia Old Time Fiddlers Association.¹

A second revival of old-time fiddling, which is still continuing today, began to take shape in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Once again, the United States had experienced the transition from wartime austerity to a burgeoning domestic consumer economy; the actual farming population of the country continued to plummet, accelerated by advances in agricultural technology; yet another innovative African-American-based style, rock ‘n’ roll, was capturing the imagination of an increasingly youthful popular entertainment audience.

Nashville record producers were abandoning instruments with distinctively rural connotations like the fiddle and steel guitar in order to penetrate broader urban and youth markets. Although the so-called urban folk music revival undoubtedly played a positive role in redefining the value and worth of older forms of country music like old-time fiddling, this second fiddle music revival appears to be a genuine grassroots preservationist movement. Between 1963 and 1974, at least twenty-four old-time fiddlers associations had been established covering most regions of the United States.² The results of a mail survey conducted in 1984-85 showed that active fiddlers’ organizations in the USA had doubled in ten years. While some of the older associations had fissured or collapsed, new ones had arisen in areas which did not have fiddling organizations ten years previously.
How can we explain the rise of the Old Time Fiddlers Association Movement in post-World War II America? Basically, these organizations can be demonstrated to be part of an ongoing cultural revitalization movement, defined by Anthony F. C. Wallace as ‘any deliberate, conscious, organized attempt by members of a society to create a more satisfying culture.’ Such grassroots preservationist organizations have emerged because they fulfil enduring expressive needs and desires which mainstream popular entertainment and mass media cannot satisfy. As the British sociologist Anthony D. Smith observes in *Theories of Nationalism*: ‘Given the dislocations of industrialisation and urbanisation, what can be more natural than that men should wish to replace the sense of lost community by creating new groups more adapted to the new conditions?’

According to social anthropologist Robert T. Anderson, the formation of voluntary organizations by displaced people is a typical response to rapid social change. Voluntary associations like the Old Time Fiddlers Associations provide traditionalists with enclaves of cultural stability in non-traditional environments. Such organizations reorganize older social institutions and give them a new legal-rational structure more in accord with the corporate and bureaucratic patterns of modern social life: ‘In this way, traditional institutions remain viable in a changed society. The process may take the form of the reorganization of the old groups.’ And, one might add, the selective reconstruction or even the reinvention of cultural symbols.

One of the most frequently cited scholarly works dealing with these questions is *The Invention of Tradition*. The invention of tradition substantiates the distinctive identity of a marginal group by imputing antiquity (and hence, authenticity and legitimacy) to cultural symbols which may actually be very new. Romantic nationalist and ethnic separatist movements, typically led by alienated middle-class intellectuals (here we see Gramsci’s influence on Hobsbawm), are attempts to offset hegemony, that is, acceptance of the cultural dominance of a ruling elite. Cultural revival movements are not restricted to disaffected intellectuals; they are also grassroots reactions to displacements or breaks caused by modernization, urbanization, and industrialization. All folk revival movements share a common goal, the restoration of an idealized culture which is believed to be in danger of disintegration. Such a break is visible even in movements deliberately describing themselves as ‘traditionalists’, and appealing to groups which were, by common consent, regarded as the repositories of historic continuity and tradition, such as peasants. Indeed, the very appearance of movements for the defence or revival of traditions, ‘traditionalist’ or otherwise, indicates such a break. Such movements, common among intellectuals since the Romantics, cannot develop or even preserve a living past (except conceivably by setting up human natural sanctuaries for isolated corners of archaic life), but must become ‘invented tradition’. At the same time, the strength and adaptability of genuine tradition is not to be confused with ‘the invention of tradition’. Where the old ways are alive, traditions need not be either revived or invented.

Traditionalist revivals emerge when devoted tradition-bearers come to feel that cherished forms of cultural expression are in danger of dying out. Organized
efforts to preserve folk music date back to the beginning of the eighteenth century in the British Isles; these early revivals of Welsh, Scottish, and Irish folk music were promoted by nostalgic immigrants, a pattern still very much alive today. Many illuminating parallels can be drawn between revivals of traditional instrumental music in the United States and the British Isles.

Prys Morgan’s *The Eighteenth Century Renaissance*, begins with an invocation of Merrie Wales that idealized primordial folk society threatened by industrialization, pleasure-shunning religious revivals, and the assimilation of Celtic Wales into the mainstream of Anglo-British society. Displaced, nostalgic Welshmen living in London during the eighteenth century founded various organizations, including one expressly devoted to the preservation and perpetuation of traditional music, the Ancient Society of Cymrrodorion. Still in existence today, this association was founded in 1751 by Lewis Morgan, a Welsh surveyor and civil servant who was a pioneering student and promoter of the folk music of his native Wales. As early as 1726, Lewis Morgan and his brother Richard were seeking out players of the old Welsh instruments, particularly the crwth (medieval English *crowd*, a bowed lyre), the *pibgorn* or hornpipe, and the *telyn* or Welsh harp. These verses by Lewis Morgan, translated from the Welsh, epitomize the revivalist spirit:

There is in Wales, one must lament  
No music and no merriment  
and yet there was in days of old  
a harp in every household.

The harp was a potent symbol of Celtic cultural identity in Wales as well as Scotland and Ireland. Prys Morgan notes that the Welsh revivalists did not literally revive the primitive single-strung Celtic harp, but focused their attention instead on the performance of their indigenous music on the triple-strung Italian baroque harp, which had been fashionable during the seventeenth century.

Most so-called revivals reconstruct and reinterpret traditional forms rather than literally preserve them. The Scottish Highland bagpipes were selectively reconstructed rather than actually revived. The same holds true of the Irish uillean pipes and also the Northumbrian smallpipes being studied by Burt Feintuch. These musical revivals are nostalgic responses to displacement.

The revival of Welsh music and other forms of traditional expressive culture began in migrant communities and only later spread to Wales itself by the 1770s. The height of the Romantic period between the 1770s and the 1840s saw the revival of the *Eisteddfod*, gatherings which included musical, poetic and oratorical competitions, and the reinvention of Druidism. Like other romantics and separatists, Welsh nativists felt that their identity was in jeopardy of being disintegrated by a powerful alien culture. As Prys Morgan says, ‘the Welsh were losing their traditional past and at the same time creating a new relationship with it’.10
We can observe some common patterns in the romantic revivals occurring in the Celtic fringe of Great Britain during the eighteenth century. Scholarly enthusiasts, very often civil servants or business people who had attained some degree of success within the mainstream culture – organized events and organizations – creating new contexts of performance for the old traditions; they became advocates and partisans of traditional performers venerated as living links to a vanishing Golden Age. The more academically inclined collected and published items gathered from such tradition-bearers, encouraging the further development of active folk revivalism and folkloristic scholarship.

In Scotland, active attempts to collect, publish and promote traditional music followed the Union of the Parliaments in 1707. Published collections of Scottish songs and dance tunes compiled by amateur and professional musicians appear in print as early as 1726 in Edinburgh. Cultural revivalism continued among Scots at home and abroad despite the restrictions upon displays of Scottish national symbols specified by the Disarming Act of 1747, imposed by the British Parliament after the failure of the final Jacobite Rebellion of 1745-46. The Highland Society, established in 1776 by Scottish gentlemen residing in London, sponsored a piping contest at the 1781 Falkirk Tryst, a yearly cattle market.

By 1782, this group successfully lobbied Parliament to remove the ban on Scottish national music and attire. Fiddle contests were also part of the Scottish cultural revival. An article in the Scots Magazine in 1809 describes the young Niel Gow (1727-1807), Robert Burns's favourite fiddler, winning a contest which included the finest players in all of Scotland. Gow's victory resulted in his patronage by the Duke of Atholl and later the Countess of Gordon.11 George S. Emmerson records that J. Scott Skinner (1843-1927) won a similar competition including the major fiddlers of his day in Inverness in 1863, and that fiddling contests had been common for over a century.12

Another wave of Scottish grassroots preservationist activity expressed itself in the formation of Strathspey and Reel Societies. The Edinburgh Strathspey and Reel Society was established in 1881. ‘Interest in fiddle music then seemed to be in decline’, noted the organization's first president, James Stewart Robertson, in the Society's minutes, and hence it was ‘very desirable that this class of music not be allowed to fall back as undoubtedly it was doing for the past few years.’13 The outcome was the establishment of a voluntary association for: ‘upholding and developing the taste for our old national highland strathspey and reel music on the fiddle.’14 As Alburger comments, the idea of the strathspey and reel society spread only gradually; a Highland Reel and Strathspey Society was founded in 1903, a similar group was organized in Aberdeen in 1928, and the Elgin Strathspey and Reel Society in 1937. Emmerson refers to an Orkney Reel and Strathspey Society as well.15 These groups feature large numbers of fiddlers playing written arrangements of fiddle tunes under the direction of conductors and are still quite popular in Scotland and Nova Scotia.

A more recent development in the revitalization of Scottish traditional music has been the advent of Accordion and Fiddle Clubs since the early 1970s. Alburger
notes that there are now over fifty such clubs in various parts of Scotland. Like American old-time fiddlers associations, these groups meet monthly or bi-monthly and provide their members with opportunities to meet and play with other amateurs of traditional music; occasionally the clubs also sponsor concerts by outstanding professional fiddlers and accordionists. Ailie Munro notes the existence of a coordinating organization, the National Association of Accordion and Fiddle Clubs, which corresponds to the National Old Time Fiddlers Association in the United States.

Fiddle contests are still important in Scotland. Alburger makes references to several major contemporary contests, including the National Fiddle Competition initiated by the BBC in 1969, the Golden Fiddle Award contest organized by the Daily Mail in 1977, and the National Fiddle Championship, sponsored by the Lothian District Council, also in 1977.

A major revival of fiddling has taken place in the Shetland Islands since the Second World War. Peter Cooke notes the emergence of several organizations in the Shetlands promoting traditional fiddling. These include the Shetland Folk Society, established in 1946, the Shetland Fiddlers Society which includes the famous fiddle band, Da Forty Fiddlers, founded in 1960 by the noted fiddler and revival promoter Tom Anderson, and also several local groups including the Lerwick Accordion and Fiddle Club (no date given) and the Unst Fiddle Society (1967). These organizations provide regular opportunities for performers and enthusiasts to play and enjoy traditional music. Cooke stresses that the style of music which comes out of these clubs is not necessarily ‘da aald Shetland fiddling’. As in North America, fiddling has been heavily affected by classical violin tone and technique; in the particular case of the Shetlands, contemporary mainland Scottish fiddling has also been very influential. An interesting development in Shetland has been the incorporation of fiddling into the local educational curriculum. Upon his retirement from business in 1971, Tom Anderson devoted himself entirely to teaching fiddle to Shetland school children, most of them girls, in the public schools. Peter Cooke and Pamela Swing, an American folklorist and fiddle music scholar who worked with Anderson as a fiddling teacher in the Shetland schools, independently reported that this project has encouraged the emergence of a syncretic ‘New Shetland’ style with clearly trans-regional elements rather than the antiquarian resurrection of older Shetland fiddling styles.

Comparable developments can be found in Ireland and the United States, where we observe elaborate, standardized contest or exhibition styles seemingly submerging older, more localized repertories and performance techniques. Thus the institutionalization of traditional music through formal organizations and competitive events, and also the development of specialized media networks diffusing custom albums and cassettes of currently fashionable fiddle stylists, replaces the pre-modern ‘classic folk’ patterns of performance and communication based on oral transmission and direct face-to-face contact. These changes in Shetland fiddling can be considered a clear-cut example of the selective reconstruction of tradition.
Like Scotland, Ireland also has a long, continuous history of folk music revivalism. Captain Francis O’Neill (1849-1936), himself one of the greatest of Ireland’s migrant folk revivalists, notes that the revival of the Irish harp was initiated by James Dungan, an Irish merchant living in Copenhagen, who organized and subsidized three gatherings of Irish harpers in Granard, County Longford in 1781, 1782 and 1783. In 1791, a group of ‘patriotic gentlemen’ organized a harp festival in Belfast; in 1807 they formed the Belfast Harp Society, which sponsored an annual festival, which lasted through the 1830s. A Dublin Harp Society was formed in 1807, and a later revival of Irish harping was led by Father T. V. Burke, who founded a new Harp Society in Drogheda in 1842, which only lasted a few years. The formation of the Society for the Preservation and Publication of the Melodies of Ireland by the collector-revivalist George Petrie resulted in the publication of Petrie’s *Ancient Music of Ireland* in 1855. The Gaelic League, founded in 1893, was very active in promoting Irish traditional music and dance around the turn of the century.

Edwin O. Henry has recently examined the history of *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann,* the most substantial modern organization devoted to the preservation of Irish traditional music. Founded in 1951 as an outshoot and extension of the Pipers’ Club of Dublin, which dates back to 1908, the CCE presently has four hundred branch societies in Ireland and ten other countries that meet regularly to offer instruction in Irish music and dance; it sponsors a series of contests which culminate in an annual international Irish folk arts festival, the *Fleadh Cheoil,* and also maintains a paid professional staff through membership fees and government grants. Current membership of the organization is approximately 35,000, with thousands of competitors and hundreds of thousands of spectators taking part in its events. Like the old-time fiddlers contest in the United States, the *Fleadh Cheoil* is perhaps the most important context of performance for modern performers of Irish traditional music. These competitions are organized in hierarchical order, ranging from county-wide and regional to provincial and national.

Similar developments can also be found in Scandinavia. The *spelmanslag* or fiddlers’ club is a major feature of contemporary Swedish musical life. Generally consisting of ten to twenty amateur performers on the violin or the keyed fiddle (*nyckelharpa*), the *spelmanslag* groups play at folk music events, often dressed in the traditional costumes of their home district, emphasizing local tunes as well as a wider national fiddlers’ repertory.

According to Gunnar Ternhag, the first modern fiddlers’ club appeared in the mid 1940s when interest in fiddle music in Sweden was at a low point. An album by the Rattvik Fiddlers Club of Dalarna helped to revive interest in the music and resulted in the emergence of fiddle ensembles throughout the country. Today there are over eight thousand Swedes belonging to the approximately 300 fiddlers clubs which comprise the *Sveriges spelmans riksforbund,* the Swedish Fiddlers Association. For the most part, these clubs are found in the smaller provincial towns, which Ternhag sees as an indication that the music is being revived in its original setting. The past twenty years have been a period of rapid growth for the Swedish fiddle
revival, corresponding closely to comparable developments in the British Isles and North America. Most of these clubs also include guitarists and accordionists, although groups composed entirely of fiddlers are supposedly more authentic. There is longstanding prejudice among Swedish fiddling enthusiasts against the accordion, which has partially usurped the traditional lead role of the fiddle in Sweden as elsewhere. Some Swedish fiddling events charge an admittance fee to accordionists while letting fiddlers in for free.

Märta Ramsten states that active attempts to preserve and revive instrumental music in Scandinavia go back at least one hundred years. Norwegian fiddle contests or kappleiks have been held continuously during the summer months since the 1880s; the first known Swedish folk music competition was held in 1906, which sparked the development of local competitions in various parts of Sweden. In contradiction to Ternhag, Ramsten dates the emergence of the spelmenslag movement to the 1920s and 1930s, and suggests that the more informal and cooperative ensemble style has come to overshadow the highly structured fiddle contests, originated by the Swedish fiddle revivalist and scholar Andreas Zorn, which are still being held today.

Ramsten's study of changes in the Zorn competitions suggests that there has been an upsurge of interest in fiddling among younger Swedes. While 70-80% of the contestants in the Zorn performances during 1967-68 were above forty years old, by 1980, 60% were under forty. There has also been an increase in female participation, which rose from 11-12% in the late 1960s to approximately 21% in 1980. (Parallels can be found in the increased participation of women in Missouri fiddle contests which have been documented by Amy Skillman, and also the preponderance of young girls in modern Shetland fiddling, which has been noted by Peter Cooke and Pamela Swing). Instruments other than the violin have been increasing in popularity; since the seventies there have been revivals of the nykelharpa and Swedish bagpipes. Younger musicians seem to be more accepting of the harmonica and accordion, which, as already noted, have been rejected by purists.

The Swedish fiddling repertory has remained relatively stable. The polska is the most popular tune genre (65%), the waltz a distant second at 12.5%, with miscellaneous genres making up the remainder between 1966 and 1980. One reason for the fixed character of the Swedish contest fiddling repertory is the influence of printed tune collections, which have assumed canonic value since the beginning of the twentieth century. This repertory is distinguished from the popular dance music tradition of the nineteenth century, which is considered to be the province of accordion players. As elsewhere, performance style and repertory appear to have been standardized through the pressures of formal competition, though some younger players seem to be taking up a more rhythmic and deliberately archaic style as a form of musical anti-modernism. All in all, the revival of Swedish fiddling seems to be following the same general trends which can be observed in the British Isles and North America.

Like Sweden, Norway also has fiddlers' clubs (spelmenlage) and national competitions. Pandora Hopkins's description of the national folk music competition
(Landskappleiken) in the small industrial city of Porsgrunn can readily be compared to similar events in Scotland, Ireland, and the United States. While fiddling plays a prominent role, there are also divisions for other instruments; contestants are divided into categories based on age and experience, which is also the case with many American fiddle contests, including the National Old Time Fiddlers Contest in Weiser, Idaho.

There is, moreover, the same combination of formal competition and informal, highly sociable jam sessions. As elsewhere, outstanding competitors make the rounds of the contest circuit, which also leads towards the emergence of style leaders, who are copied by up and coming players seeking to impress the judges. This results in the emergence of highly controlled and elaborate contest styles which tend to overshadow more localized styles and repertories. Like the Irish Fleadh Ceol Na Eirrean, the Norwegian national folk music competition moves from town to town. As in Sweden, the British Isles, and North America, local and regional fiddlers' clubs in Norway are part of a larger national organization, the Landslaget for Spelemenn, which publishes the Spelemannsbladet or Player's Newspaper. In addition to 'grassroots' players with family or neighbourhood connections to traditional fiddling, Norway also has its own urban folk enthusiasts who have adopted traditional fiddling as an alternative to elite and popular cosmopolitan culture. While Hopkins concentrates upon the hardingfele tradition, she also notes that dance music played on ordinary violins, accordions, and guitars is also part of the Norwegian folk music scene. The Hardanger fiddle, though, plays an important symbolic role, because it is distinctively Norwegian.

While its exact history is uncertain, Norwegians have made and played the hardingfele for at least three hundred years. The tradition is being carried on today in informal contexts such as house parties and neighbourhood dances as well as the more formal settings of the fiddlers organization: 'a chapter of which exists in every locality where the Hardanger fiddle is played. Master teachers instruct beginners in individual and in group classes sponsored by the local fiddlers clubs. The old Norwegian fiddlers played at weddings, local dances, and occasionally at fiddle contests held at fairs, which was also true in the British Isles and early America. Today's Norwegian fiddlers play in a more organized and regulated social environment, that of the fiddlers' club and folk festival, following a pattern which is true of other folk musicians in modern Western societies. Interestingly, the Hardanger fiddle revival, which appears to date back to the 1880s, not long after Norway won independence from Denmark, has suppressed other local types of fiddles. The emergence of a regional style which is adopted outside its area of origin and takes on the status of a national folk style is another common feature of such movements; one can point to Sligo style in Ireland and Texas longbow style fiddling in North America as parallels to the Norwegian situation, though here we are also dealing with a type of instrument as well as a style of performance. As in Sweden, a popular dance repertory closely associated with the accordion was rejected in favour of an older and purportedly purer fiddle repertory. The hegemony of the hardingfele
has recently been challenged by the formation of flatfele organizations in areas where
the Hardanger fiddle was previously unknown. Meanwhile, Norwegian-Americans
established the Hardanger Fiddle Society of America in 1983.

The ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl believes that such revivals of traditional
music enable people in contemporary society to offset disorientation and displacement
by allowing them to periodically regenerate an idealized primordial community,
which is evoked through particular historical musical styles:

The fact that most humans can no longer conveniently exhibit their cultural
specialness by dress, social structure, material culture, or even by their
location, language or religion has given music an increased role as an emblem
of ethnicity. Culture units, nations, minorities, even age groups, social classes,
educational strata all identify themselves by adherence to particular repertories
and styles of music. As other means of identification become less effective,
music is increasingly stressed. I would agree this is why world music of the
twentieth century has retained its diversity.36

Displacement can be symbolic as well as literal; this more abstract form of
displacement, alienation, accounts for transcultural folk romantic movements like
the so-called urban folk music revival in the United States and Britain. Historically,
the alienation of middle-class intellectuals from urban, industrial, commercial,
bureaucratic values has characteristically led to romantic identification with
idealized folk communities, which have seemingly preserved their primal integrity,
uncorrupted by the metropolis. Anthony D. Smith's description of the attraction of
marginal, exotic Brittany to nineteenth-century French pastoral romantics applies to
folk romanticism in general:

[T]hey turned their backs on the materialism of city life, on technological
advance and commercialism, and on the ever-increasing complexity of a
centralized, regulated state, and sought instead some antidote far from the
capital, which might restore them to themselves and express concretely a more
‘natural’ and ‘spiritual’ form of existence than that they had abandoned.37

Disaffected people reacting against perceived strictures and constraints of an
oppressive social order will often attempt to create more satisfying identities for
themselves by taking on selected aspects of the cultural symbology of romanticized
exotics; to quote cultural anthropologist George de Vos: ‘In brief, the ethnic identity
of a group of people consists of their subjective symbolic or emblematic use of any
aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups. These
emblems can be imposed from outside or embraced from within.’38 Obviously, there
is much more to be said about the subject of folk revivalism. It is heartening to
see that a growing number of folklorists in the United States and elsewhere have
realized that folk revivalism needs to be taken seriously. More detailed research
dealing with the subject in comparative perspective will help the folklore profession
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to come to terms with a significant cultural phenomenon which has been a continual part of modern social life for nearly three hundred years.

Notes
30 Hopkins (1986), p. 82.