The Cowboy Fiddle of Bus Boyk

By Hollis Taylor


The next week’s entries chronicle shows in Vegas, Salt Lake City (with Marty Robbins), Casper, Cheyenne, Denver, and Manitou Springs, Colorado. Bus kept detailed notes, like the Orlando, Florida, gig on May 5—No crowd, no show. Received $50 cash.

The first week of July saw entries for: Uniform $45; Austin, Texas (Willie Nelson); San Antonio—Gov. Connolly’s Ranch BBQ for LBJ, met the crew of Air Force One, then played World’s Fair in evening, 20-piece band, 12,000 people SRO. Price and his band zigzagged across the continent from the San Francisco “Hippie Theater” to the Huntsville, Texas, Prison Rodeo.

Although the notes are detailed, Bus’ memory is so clear even in his eighty-sixth year that he almost needn’t have kept them. I caught up with him at his Portland, Oregon, home to find out more about his seven-decade career which encompasses several chapters of American popular culture.

Tell us about your musical beginnings.

In 1926, I was nine years of age. The depression was on. A man came to our house in Everett, Washington, to recruit kids for fiddle lessons at a buck a lesson. My mother asked me if I wanted to learn the violin. I said, “I don’t want to play that squeaky thing!” Well, she won out. I started taking lessons, but I got disillusioned because the other kids were doing better than me. I was ready to throw in the towel. About that time, another teacher took over and started to give me private lessons. I liked him right away. We played little violin duets, which was fun. This was the turning point. Eventually, I had to quit the lessons because money was too tight. I took about 100 lessons all told.

My dad played guitar in an old-time string band called the Sheet Metal Band. By the age of ten, I was going to rehearsals and found out I could pick up tunes by ear. They made me a member. One day, we got a chance to play at the local radio station sponsored by the Circle Sandwich Shop. After the program, the shop said, “Come down—we’re gonna treat you.” I ordered a milkshake. I thought, man, can you believe you can get that for just playing the fiddle. Maybe that’s the beginning of when I got hooked.

The first fiddler I remember was a guy in my father’s band who would look up at the ceiling and bounce his bow like crazy. It looked flashy, like he was really doin’ something. As time went on, I realized I couldn’t hear any music coming out. He was just fooling people.

I played in the orchestra in junior high and high school. This was when I practiced a lot at home, besides playing in school. I practiced as much as six hours a day. Well, it paid off. When I graduated from high school in 1936, I started jamming with guys around town, mostly guitar players. We’d listen to cowboy bands and standards on the radio, and I found I could hear them in my head. Things progressed. Most of the early gigs were freebies; occasionally you got paid a few bucks.

When you were playing these standards, you were already improvising?

I found out I didn’t want to play the melody over and over. I began to hear the chords, and I would try to find things to play in those chords form licks. You’re having such a ball at the time, you aren’t thinking that you are learning something.

What were your early bands?

First, in the 1930s, I performed with the Cascade Hillbillies and the Rancho Serenaders (see back cover photo). (We were originally The Rhythm Rangers, but a guy stole our name, and we had to change it to the Rancho Serenaders.) We met someone connected to the movie industry who promised to get us in the movies in L.A. When you’re a kid, you really go for that. He gave us the new
“Don’t play over people’s head... Play it simpler, even if you have lots of technique, because there are times you don’t need it. You try to tell a story...”

did you do comedy or just music?

Glen Larsen, our guitarist, was a natural comedian. You’d have about eight minutes to do your act if you weren’t a headliner. There were five acts on the show. It could be a magician, acrobats, a ballroom team, an opera singer, movie stars—they were usually the headliners. There was only time for three tunes. We’d open with a rip-snorter, then a fiddle solo, then close with a novelty tune, usually Glen doing a take-off on “You’ll Be Nobody’s Darlin’ but Mine” with a Swedish accent. He was good at mugging, he’d smile at the people, and it would just crack them up.

We also went back East. But when the war came along, two of the guys had to go. It left Larsen and me. We went to San Francisco to try to get on the USO. At first, we didn’t make it. We took a job at a cannery in a panic to make ends meet. Then we got a showcase in San Francisco. I met Johnny Mercer backstage. The Mills Brothers were featured on the show, people like that we were on the bill with. Things picked up, and we worked our way back East playing the top theaters.

On our second try we were accepted for a year-long USO tour. This was during WWII. We went first to Labrador. We would do shows at all the air bases, even really small ones like a twenty-one-man radar unit. Then we were sent to Greenland and Iceland. We’d fly in a plane that was so cold I would wrap my fiddle with an old Army blanket. Often we would sit and wait until the weather cleared before we could get to the smaller places. On arriving, they’d assign you to a driver and vehicle. You’d get to the camp in time for dinner, then it was show time, then the next day another place, continuously until we covered both islands.

After Greenland and Iceland, we got on a British ship to England. The buzz bombs were coming in then; and the city was heavily bombed. We were there quite a while as there were a lot of bases in England. At the end of one year, we came home on the Queen Elizabeth, and I played for the wounded soldiers on the ship. The night before we landed in Boston, I took my fiddle outside just for fun. I played at the stern of the ship. A few people started to sing. It kept growing. Before I knew it, there were heads as far as I could see. They sang and sang. It’s an experience you never forget.

After the war, Glen wanted to be a comedian and I wanted to play music. I had to get with somebody, and the Yeary Brothers from Portland, Oregon, came to Everett. We hooked up, playing local dates, and then we started to tour the same vaudeville clubs I had been doing with Glen.

When did you move to Portland?

In 1949 I was in California, playing with Cal Shrum and the Rhythm Rangers in Oakland, San Jose, and San Francisco. It got to the point that we weren’t getting paid, and we decided to leave. Dave Yeary was then in a group in Portland called Roy Jackson and the Northwesterners. They asked me to join them.

We played a half hour show five days a week on KEX radio. It was a great group, a fun group. There was a writer, and from day to day he’d have both new stuff and continuity. The guys had scripts to read in between the numbers. We’d do cowboy songs, and standards—pop tunes; the musicians were versatile. Accordion, guitar, bass, and fiddle. We had different music all the time, and we’d read it. We also played a lot of other casuals around town. It was a steady job until Roy was called back into the service....

A lot of people think your cowboy band, The Sons of the Golden West, was, if not the best, one of the best cowboy bands that ever was. How did you get started?

The radio job ended, and I’d just got married. There had been a
group in Portland called the Pals of the Golden West. Dave Yearly was in that, and Sam White on bass, and Paul Schilling on lead guitar, Freddy Disignio on accordion, and Bob Sturgeon on guitar. All the guys except me sang. They had a real good band but they weren't getting enough work. They met someone who booked them in Burley, Idaho, at Les Nelson’s Pilots Club for a couple of weeks. They needed a fiddle player. They came over to our place and asked me about it. I couldn’t decide what to do, but I finally said yes. We left Portland in the summer of 1953 with our families and kids in four cars. It looked like a caravan coming down the road.

Burley was a little farming community, and they didn't see much entertainment. Our group had music, comedy, the whole ball of wax. The vaudeville experience that Dave had experienced with his brothers really helped. We clicked with each other and the audience. It was the Fourth of July, we were doing our show, our music and comedy. The club door was open, and I could see people outside standing in their pickup beds trying to see us because the room was standing room only. The manager liked us, so we played another two weeks, then he took us up to Sun Valley and all around. We had a ball.

Then we got a job in Omaha at the Embers Club. We left Jackson, on to Cheyenne, then from Cheyenne to Omaha, which is flat country. One of the cars broke down. I slowed down as I approached, and they were out of their car sizzling and waving at us. I thought they had stopped to let the kids out for a rest stop, so we waved back and kept going. Wow! We had to open that night at the club in Omaha. I don’t recall how they got to Omaha, but they did and I shall never live down the embarrassment of that goof on my part.

After that, we had to find another place to go. We called a guy in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, who said, “Yeah, we’ll bring you into the Cowboy Bar.” It happened that he spent a lot of money remodeling it, and then the place caught on fire just as our other gig ended. In desperation, we called the Wort Hotel. We didn’t have fancy cowboy suits yet, but it didn’t seem to matter. He brought us in there at a low figure, because you have to prove yourself. It caught on with all the tourists who go through there on their way to Yellowstone in the summer.

For a decade from June 1 through Labor Day, sometimes later, we’d play the Wort Hotel, and we’d go back for winter events.... The place would fill up in the summer. The movie Shane was being done there. They made a lot of movies there, so when Charlton Heston, Glenn Ford, and other stars were there, they’d come in during the afternoon to relax and catch our show....

You also played Vegas. What was Vegas like back then?

We started there in 1953 at the Golden Nugget. One of their bigshots came up to Jackson in the fall to hunt. He and his wife liked us so much they put it in a word for us there. (Harvey also heard us there and liked us, from Harvey’s Wagon Wheel on the south shore of Lake Tahoe, and he started booking us at his place.) The policy at the Golden Nugget was pop groups, not cowboy, but they booked us in and we caught on. They kept renewing our contracts, weeks at a time, maybe four times a year. We’d even put our kids in school there. It got to be almost like home for us. We had other towns with casinos we’d play, too. You could just keep going from one place to the other once you got on that circuit.

All your old band photos show off extraordinary costumes. When did that begin?

We had played in Omaha, and they didn’t like us because it was a fancy club but we didn’t have fancy suits. When we got to Chicago, we looked for outfits, but they weren’t too western-minded. We went to Marshall Field’s, and they didn’t have anything. One night coming home from a movie, we walked by a shop with a mannequin dressed up in a cowboy suit, hat, etc. I called the guys over, and we thought, “Hey, that’s just what we want.” We went in the next day and ordered three suits apiece, all the same style but different colors, with appliqué, really flashy. From there we went to Toronto to play The Brown Derby where we got to wear them for the first time. It was before jeans came in. Later, it was hard to get used to wearing jeans on shows when people started wearing them, having lived through a dressy period. The Plainsmen, Spade Cooley—they all wore western suits, and I thought it looked good.

Tell us about the Sons’ recordings.
"The bottom line is that eventually you create your own style."

We made contact with the cowboy actor Jimmy Wakeley at the Wort Hotel and got to be good friends... He produced one LP and about ten 45s for us on his Shasta Records label, tunes like "The Timber Trail," "Empty Saddles," "Wagon Wheels," "Love Me Tender," "Danny Boy," and "Sierra Nevada."

After the Sons, you played in various formations, but certainly your tour with Ray Price was one of the most interesting.

In 1968, I was playing with a country band in Great Falls, Montana. The gig ended in Billings. My wife called to say that they wanted to add a fifth fiddle to the Ray Price fiddle section. I was shocked, and I needed the job. I came home to Portland and immediately got on a bus to Fresno. From then on it was constant touring. Concerts, dances—depending on the venue. We played big coliseums and shows especially in the South and back East, while Texas had a lot of dance halls.

The band was twelve-piece, but they sometimes brought a bunch of other guys to augment the band to twenty pieces, like for the Governor Connolly gig. The FBI boarded the bus to see if we had any guns. LBJ welcomed us. They made a speech about Ray being a Texas son—they were proud of him. That night we had to play the World’s Fair. We had a motorcycle escort on both sides when we left the President. They pulled over traffic so we could make the date. Blondie, our keyboard player, was driving like mad, with the guys cheering him on.

We also played the Huntsville Prison Rodeo. We had to go through the thickest doors I ever saw. We got on a wagon with our music stands. The rodeo grounds were rough, and I was afraid the stands were going to flop off, but we got through it. I can still see the convicts riding the wild horses. They wore a striped cap and striped suits—I wished I could have watched the whole thing. Boy, were they good. Nothing scared them.

Our friend and fellow-fiddler, James Mason, recently described your playing to me: "He has the greatest and most rare talent as a musician. He uses his vast stylistic experiences and technical skills not to impress or draw attention to himself but to weave magical strands of passion and sincerity into any musical fabric, always showing us something that was there, but we just had not seen." He’s not alone. Your music speaks to so many people, from old-time musicians to beboppers. I would describe it as tasteful, you don’t overplay although you can really turn it on. I like how sometimes you play so sparingly it’s almost like you’re going to stop, or fall apart, and then you surprise us with something amazing, or beautiful, or funny. How did your style evolve?

I was over at the Division Street Corral, around the corner here. A bunch of guys were jamming on “Sweet Georgia Brown,” maybe for half an hour, extended and wild, everybody playing as much as they could. Sometimes, it sounded like a bunch of cats to me, the kind of stuff the average person couldn’t tell what was going on or really enjoy. I learned a little lesson right there. Don’t play over people’s head. Try to be a commercial player. Play it simpler, even if you have lots of technique, because there are times you don’t need it. You try to tell a story. You listen to the vocals, sometimes a little of nothing is a lot better than too much.

What other advice do you have for improvisers?

Start at the beginning, which is the triad. Learn the chords to a tune and learn the melody. Sing the tune. To begin with, I played mostly country tunes, cowboy tunes. Later, I added pop tunes (which have more chords). It’s important to listen while you learn. Switch your thinking from just playing the melody over and over to wanting to play something else. Train your ears to hear the chords and the names of the chords. It helps to know the names of the notes in the chord so you can build musical phrases. While you are improvising, you mentally hear the melody, even though you are not playing it.

Listen to hot players playing swing, bluegrass, big band, blues—anything that swings. This is ear training. You will notice that most musicians do a lot of listening to get ideas to use in their own playing. As you go along, you think about things such as vibrato, phrasing, bowing, interpretation, expression, emotion. You have your heroes and try to emulate them. Most of the time it doesn’t work. Anyway, it didn’t work for me. The bottom line is that eventually you create your own style.
Miles Davis said, “You have to learn all this, and then you have to forget it.” It seems like you are a master of this, balancing the knowledge with the emotion. How much are you actually thinking about?

I have to think ahead of where I’m playing, thinking of the chords, one follows the next, so before I get to the second one I have to decide how to approach it, always thinking ahead of the next chord. But I’m not thinking too much, because that affects your playing. Anybody who reads can play lots of notes. If you want something special, it has to come from inside.

Also, the better the musicians you play with, the better you play. If you bring yourself down and play with three chord players, which I have done, there’s no room to improvise, there’s nothing there to inspire you. But you get a good guitar player like Paul Schilling or John Stewart—they give you all these passing chords and stuff that sets your brain to working. You look for things to play, to build on. But if they’re just hitting a plain C chord, where are you? You have to try to create something, and that’s hard.

Do you practice on your instrument, in your head, by listening—how do you spend most of your practice time?

I spent an awful lot of time listening to start with. That’s why I have such a big music collection, all kinds. When it got into rock and bebop, I dropped off, but up through the big band and swing era I stayed current. I do a lot of thinking in bed. I wake up early, and I can make a full arrangement on a tune like “Avalon.” What am I going to do to make it different? I know the key, where the fingers go, then I pick the phrases I want to play, and try to remember them—that’s the hard part. I immerse myself to the point that I almost think I am actually playing.

You were born in 1917. You played in the old-time string band, you played cowboy, country, western swing, swing, and now these days you’re in a bluegrass band...

I didn’t think I would ever be in a bluegrass band. When I was young, I didn’t like it. It’s a terrible thing to say. It was called hillbilly, but now it’s sophisticated, it’s called bluegrass and very popular.

You’ve even been an old time fiddle champion, fifth in your division at Weiser, a Western Swing Hall of Famer—you’ve played all of these styles as the times and tastes have changed. You’ve been flexible and kept evolving. Sometimes live music is in, sometimes it’s out. Sometimes cowboy music is in, sometimes it’s out. I’ve asked you today about some of the best times, but in a career of seven decades, you’ve probably seen some real down times too.

You have to take the good with the bad and keep going. If you don’t, that’s the end of it. My father and brother worked in the Everett sawmill. Back then Everett had more sawmills than any town. My brother Wayne drove me down to introduce me to his boss—I was going to take the job. He parked his car at the edge of a cliff, and we just sat there, and the longer we sat there the more I knew I didn’t want to do it. Something couldn’t make me go. I don’t know what it was. I bet we sat there twenty minutes. Neither of us said a word, but I think he understood. After a while, he just started his car up and we drove away. I didn’t want that because I got into music at such a young age. That’s why I had to leave town.

Have you sometimes taken jobs away from your family in some far-away place just to make ends meet?

Yeah, I did a lot of that. Sometimes I’d play in remote places like Montana. Once I went with a band from Missoula clear north to Fort McMurray, Alberta, near the Arctic Circle. It was strictly a country band, and they had booked rock groups in there ahead of us. Following them was murder. We’d do our stuff for awhile and all we’d hear was, “Play some rock! Play some rock!” You can imagine what a bind that would put you in. You have those kind of dates sandwiched in between the good ones, but you do anything to keep going.

And keep going he has. Traversing boundaries of genre, generation, and geography, Bus Boyk survives as one of the last of the great cowboy fiddlers. In bringing his imagination to these musical styles, Bus has contributed to the evolution of decades of American music.

[The Cowboy Fiddle of Bus Boyk, a book/CD set including 18 music transcriptions and historic cuts, is available for $35 postpaid from www.hollistaylor.com or Hollis Taylor, P.O. Box 4666, Portland, OR 97208-4666. The hot fiddle cassette Dark Eyes with Bus Boyk is available from him for $13 postpaid at 16205 SE Stephens Street, Portland, OR 97233.]

[Hollis Taylor is a champion fiddler, composer, and author currently living in Australia. For information on her fiddle books and recordings, see her ad on page 41 and her website at www.hollistaylor.com]