Claude "Fiddler" Williams: Kansas City Swing

By Mary Larsen

Kansas City Swing fiddler Claude Williams was born in Muskogee, Oklahoma, in 1908. A gifted musician at a very early age, he was playing guitar, mandolin, banjo and cello by the time he was ten. But when he heard Joe Venuti play, he knew he had to add the violin to his accomplishments. His family bought him his first violin the day after the Venuti concert, and before Williams went to bed that night, he was already playing tunes on it. Playing with his brother-in-law Ben Johnson's string band earned Williams six to seven dollars a night in tip money at a time when most people were making five or six dollars a week.

In 1928 Williams moved to Kansas City, which was fast becoming the swing capital of the country. He played guitar and violin with the Twelve Clouds of Joy and with them made his first recordings. They often played "jitney" dances, or ten-cents-a-dance dances, which necessitated a large number of short tunes (or parts of longer ones). He frequently jammed with other great jazz and swing players such as Charlie Parker, Lester Young, and Mary Lou Williams. He learned to play his fiddle loud to compete with reed and brass instruments.

In the mid 1930s, Williams joined up with Count Basie as his guitarist. Williams was part of Basie’s first recordings for Decca, and was voted “Best Guitarist of the Year” in a Downbeat national readers’ poll. When he was replaced in the Basie Orchestra by guitarist Freddie Green, Williams went on to lead a variety of bands. In 1980, Classic Jazz released Fiddler’s Dream, the last recording to feature Williams’ guitar playing. Since then he has stayed with the violin.

Now eighty-six years old and still a fantastic fiddler, Williams is finally getting the recognition he has long deserved. In the late ’80s he was part of a revue of original African American art forms called “Black and Blue.” It started in Paris and moved to Broadway, where it won many awards. It was during this time that Williams recorded his two highly recommended Live at J’s CDs (Arhoolie 405 and 406), released in 1993. In 1989, he was featured in the National Council for the Traditional Arts’ “Masters of the Folk Violin” tour. During that same year he was one of the first to be inducted into the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame.

In 1992 he performed in Washington, D.C. for the Clinton inauguration. In 1993 he performed in Australia as part of a “Living Traditions” tour and a “Violin Summit” in connection with the Brisbane Biennial Festival. The response to him there was terrific, and he was hailed by the media as “the last of the great swing fiddlers” and “the last great black jazz violinist.” He has also played at the Monterey Jazz Festival, the Newport Jazz Festival, the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife...the list goes on and on.

So far in 1994, he performed at the 25th annual New Orleans Jazz Festival in April, followed by teaching and lecturing at Mark O’Connor’s first fiddle camp, and live recording work at the Zoo Bar in Lincoln, Nebraska, for use on National Public Radio’s “Jazz Set.” In August, he received the first and only Charlie Christian Jazz Award from Black Liberated Arts, Inc. In September, Williams performed with Bob Bowman and Rod Fleeman as the headline act at the 21st annual Wheatland Music Festival in Remus, Michigan. After the festival, some of the fans complained that they had looked forward to hearing the eighty-six-year-old fiddler they had heard would be there — “Where was that old fiddler?” they asked, not realizing or not believing that the amazing musician they had seen with the Swing String Trio was indeed eighty-six years old (or eighty-six years young). Williams is doing another “Masters of the Folk Violin” tour, along with Kenny Baker, Michael Doucet, Brendan Mulvihill and Natalie MacMaster. They will be touring the Midwest and the East coast in November (1994), and the West coast in March of 1995.

I wanted to ask Williams some specifics about his fiddle playing, which I’ve long admired and which has earned him a place as one of America’s greats.

Let’s start at the beginning. I read that you played the guitar, mandolin, banjo and cello by the time you were ten years old. How old were you when you heard Joe Venuti play and were inspired to take up the fiddle?

Ten years old.
And how did you learn fiddle — did you take lessons?

Well, I first learned it by ear. When I got the fiddle, I had played guitar, banjo, mandolin — I had played all of those by ear. When I heard Joe Venuti, the last thing I had played was the cello. And we had taken the strings off the cello and put bass strings on it because my brother-in-law had a string band and we needed a bass player. We didn’t realize the cello was also a lead instrument. When I heard Joe Venuti with a big band — I was standing about a half a block from the place — and the violin was so beautiful up over the whole band... I told my mother, “That’s what I want to play.” So the next thing we did, we took the cello down and traded it for a fiddle. When I brought the fiddle home, I could play it because I’d been playing mandolin. It’s the same thing — I just had to figure out how to bow the fiddle. My brother-in-law told my mother I needed to know something about music then. My first violin teacher — I could play better than he could, but I didn’t know what I was doing. I learned some bowing, and I went from him to another teacher, who was really good. The first cat was a colored man, the next one was a white cat. If I’d stayed with him I’d be able to play with any symphony by now. But after I learned how to read the piano score, I thought I knew all I needed to know about the fiddle. I’d get a song down and teach it to my brother-in-law. I was learning string band stuff, just popular stuff, like [sings] “How you gonna keep ‘em down on the farm after they’ve seen Paree?”

Have you been influenced by other styles of music?

Being from Muskogee, I was over in Tulsa quite a bit playing — you know, Bob Will’s and his Texas Playboys. But I never did play any of that style. I stuck to the regular jazz. Well, we called it swing then.

Do you play around with any other styles now?

Well, no. I’m still strict on the jazz kick. The jazz style that I play I always likened to a tenor sax and trumpet. Louis Armstrong was

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the first one I heard play a diminished chord on the trumpet. I had never heard anything like that before and I got interested in the trumpet sound and the tenor sax. Ben Webster was one of my idols, and so was Louis Armstrong.

When you first went to Kansas City in 1928, did you find it difficult to break into the music scene there?

No. I came up here with the Twelve Clouds of Joy, and when we got here we were about the best band in Kansas City. We had Benny Moten’s band to run up against, and George E. Lee had a big band. They were the two best bands in Kansas City. We had to rearrange a lot of our music because we had been playing for jinny dances. We never did play a song over two and a half or three minutes. So all our songs were real short and we had to add to them. But we didn’t have too much trouble doing that.

What are some of your most memorable performances?

Well, Carnegie was one. And then I made a trip to Paris and we played in one of the biggest halls there… This was in 1976 or ‘78. I went over with Jay McShann and another group, one of George Wein’s events. After we played, a lady came up to me to autograph an old ’78 album that I made in ’28 with Twelve Clouds of Joy.

Do you think about your music analytically at all, or is it more intuitive?

I think of different chords and different styles of trumpet and saxophone playing. You know, we’re just playing the melody, and the melody has chords to it, so I mostly play by the chords.

Has your music changed at all as you’ve gotten older?

Well it might have changed a little — there’s a different way you attack the notes. Everybody says the older I get, the better I sound, so I want to thank them for that. Because I hope I don’t just quit or retire or something before I go down the other way!

What do you do to prepare for a gig? Do you warm up a certain way?

Not really. I do my practicing. I run over my fiddle every day to keep my fingers limber.

What do you do to practice? Do you practice scales or tunes?

Well, mostly tunes, and changes to chords.

How much do you practice a day?

Maybe forty-five minutes or an hour, sometimes longer than that.

Is there anything that’s still difficult for you to play on the violin?

I don’t think so. Different songs have different melodies and different chords. I just have to run over them every once in a while.

Are you comfortable going out of first position?

Yes, I play in fifth position, but I really wasn’t taught that. I didn’t go far enough with my teacher to learn much about different positions. I play up there, but I really don’t know what I’m doing, other than that I’m playing the right changes.

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What’s your favorite environment to play in?

Mostly in nightclubs. Jam sessions at some night clubs. I always play in pretty stylish clubs, and if we have a jam session, ain’t nobody gonna come up to jam unless they can play pretty good. So I enjoy it.

Do you still improvise as much as you might have at one time, or do you have the tunes pretty much worked out now?

I probably improvise now a little more. You get the right notes in a chord and you change them around, from seventh to ninth... When Duke Ellington first started playing all flat ninths and all those chords, it was over the average person’s head. They were saying Duke was playing dischords, but they didn’t know what they were listening to.

How much work is involved in coming up with a new tune for you, or a new way of playing a tune?

It’s pretty natural. It depends on who I’m playing with — if it’s a guitar or a piano, as long as they know the right changes to a song... All songs have different chords. If a man writes a song, he writes a melody and puts in his own chords. And then some chords, as you get further into jazz, there are other chords you can play — instead of diminished, you might play a minor or a flat ninth. Whoever writes the song writes his chords down with it. Smart jazz players who know about music can change them around and play their own chords, but they don’t change the melody of the man’s song.

Do you enjoy writing songs yourself?

Not too much. I don’t do too much writing. Once I hear a song and like the melody and like the changes, then I can take that song and get where I can play the right chords, and then change them around to whatever sounds right to me, but that goes along with the melody.

You’ll be on the Masters of the Folk Violin tour this year. You were on it in 1989, too — what do you like about it?

I enjoyed the last tour. There were six fiddle players on it, and every one of us played a different style. Alison Krauss was known as a long-bow Texas stylist. And there was some hoedown fiddle. Michael Doucet and his brother were on it.

Do you have plans to do another album?

Yes, we have a recording date. I suppose you’re hip to my booking agent — Russ Dantzler? He’s a fine cat. We’ve been friends for... I met him in Lincoln, Nebraska. Then when I went to work on “Black and Blue” in New York he had an apartment between Eighth and Ninth Avenues on 43rd Street, and I lived with him so I didn’t have to walk but about two blocks to work. So he said, “Claude, I’m going to start booking you.” And he’s been doing it.

What kind of fiddle do you have?

Oh, I have a pretty good fiddle — I didn’t know it was as good as it is. It’s a German fiddle. There’s a violin maker in Washington, D.C. and I wanted him to give me an appraisal. He was kind of busy, he just glanced at it and said it would start at thirty-five hundred. That’s the one I’m playing now. I have two or three pretty good fiddles.

What kind of strings do you use?

Dr. Thomastik.
Do you have a favorite tune?

Not really, but I like "Cherokee." Charlie Parker plays some beautiful stuff and different changes on that, and I play some of his stuff on it. And I play one by the name of "These Foolish Things Remind Me of You."

Do you have any advice or tips for other fiddlers?

Every time you pick up your fiddle you can learn a little bit more about it. Just practice and keep it up. That's about all you can do. You can take lessons on the fiddle for ten, fifteen years, and that's what you have to do in order to play with a good symphony, if you want to consider playing anywhere around first chair.

[Thanks to Russ Dantzler for his help with this article.]

*Selected Discography of Claude Williams Recordings*

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<th>Performers/Album</th>
<th>Record Label</th>
<th>Cat. #</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Title TBD. Williams with Sir Roland Hansa, Bill Eastley, Earl May, and Joe Ascione</td>
<td>Progressive</td>
<td></td>
<td>Recorded 1994 Avail. early 1995</td>
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<tr>
<td>Claude Williams Live at J's, Volume 1</td>
<td>Arhoolie Productions, Inc.</td>
<td>CD 405</td>
<td>Recorded 1989 Released 1993</td>
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<tr>
<td>Claude Williams Live at J's, Volume 2</td>
<td>Arhoolie Productions, Inc.</td>
<td>CD 406</td>
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<td>Claude Williams with the Frankfurt Swing Allstars, Live at Five</td>
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<tr>
<td>Claude Williams Quinter, Call for The Fiddler</td>
<td>SteepleChase</td>
<td>SCS-1051 (LP only)</td>
<td>1976</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jay McShann and Claude Williams, Man From Muskogee</td>
<td>Sackville Recordings P. O. Box 10002, Stn. O Toronto, Ontario M4A 2X4, Canada</td>
<td></td>
<td>1972 (CD re-issue available 1995)</td>
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<td>Claude Williams, Fiddler's Dream</td>
<td>Classic Jazz</td>
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The Claude Williams Live at J's CDs may be ordered from Russ Dantzler, 325 West 43rd St., Suite 4FW, New York, NY 10036, (212) 586-8125. Send $15 for each CD or $25 for each pair of Volume 1 & 2 plus $3 handling for an order of any size.

Note: High quality digital tapes of "Fiddler" have been made in the past three years and should eventually be released. They were done in both studio and live situations. Please feel free to contact Russ Dantzler (address above) for further information.
Back Home in Indiana

Transcribed by Jack Tuttle as played by Claude Williams on his Live at J's Part 2 CD (Arhoeleic 406).

This is an old standard that is best deciphered with the help of the recording. Two choruses are presented here — the first a very jazzy statement of the melody, then going into Williams' challenging solo. Notice the preponderance of slurs from the off beat to the beat — a very common swing approach.
Back Home in Indiana (Solo)