

Happy Valley Fiddle Maker Bob Kogut

and the Quest for the Perfect Fiddle

By Bob Buckingham

I met Bob Kogut at the first Appalachian State University Fiddlers Convention, an indoor event, in February of 2009. In the luthiery room, full of instrument builders, one was treated to an array of new banjos, guitars (electric and acoustic), and fiddles. Bob Kogut is a big friendly man with a ready smile and a love of all things fiddle. His fiddles are pieces of art and are played by some highly respected players. When asked a few questions, his answers flowed like a river of words. Here are some of his thoughts on his art and the world of fiddles.

Being born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, I did not have the opportunity to hear old time fiddle music or bluegrass music. I was in my late thirties when my younger brother John offered to take me to a fiddlers' convention in nearby Conowingo, Maryland, at a place called Sunrise Park. At first, I balked at going, since I didn't particularly care for country music. But my brother assured me that this was something very different, and he already had the bug for old time fiddle music.

That event was a life-changing experience, watching jam sessions in the campground without any amplifiers or even sheet music — just players playing as if they were carrying on conversation. So I knew right then I had to play the fiddle, and the following Monday, went to the local music store and bought a fiddle. It didn't take me long to outgrow that student fiddle, so there I began my holy grail search for that fiddle with the perfect voice.

Like so many fiddlers, it was a frustrating and time-consuming journey — finding, buying, then trying to resell those fiddles that seemed like “the one” at first, then not living up to the expectation after all. This went on for years.

Eventually I moved to central Florida, still on my search for that perfect fiddle. There I met an amazing person named Bob Bragg, in Lake Panasoffkee. Bob is one of the leading experts on violins, and has written reference books on violins that other experts refer to in the violin world. He always had a changing inventory of fiddles in his home workshop that he obtained from all over the country. Bob allowed me to make weekly visits to his home to check out what he had, and take several home with me at a time, to see if one of them was “the one.” This went on for more than a year, and I took a lot of his precious time, bothering him with my obsession.



Bob eventually began showing me how to repair, restore, and set up the fiddles I took home with me, and I would bring them back for him to critique and correct my work. Over time, he had me perform more and more high-level skilled work, and guided me all the way. Of course, I never did find that ultimate fiddle out of dozens and dozens of them. Some of them were regular factory fiddles, and some of them were very expensive pedigreed instruments. The only thing that mattered to me was finding that voice and tone that I needed to have, and not the origin or value of the instrument. Well, the time eventually came when I announced to Bob that I was giving up my search for that holy grail fiddle, and as a matter of fact, giving up playing the fiddle, since the whole thing was more frustration than joy for me.

When I said that I didn't think I would ever find that fiddle, Bob said, “I agree, you'll never find it — you're one of those fiddlers that cannot ever be satisfied with anything but the rare voice which hardly any violins have.” I was deflated by his words, until the next thing he told me was, “You're just going to have to make yourself one, to get what you're searching for.” I laughed and said there is no way I can make a violin. Bob responded by telling me that he already had me doing things that were far more difficult than building one from scratch, and that he knew I was ready and able to build one. Sure enough, I built my first one, took it to Bob, and he had me take it back apart and do it all over to get a better voicing. That happened with the first bunch of violins that I made, until I finally hit on obtaining that great tone I had always dreamed about, under Bob Bragg's mentoring.

I design my fiddles to have a dark, deep tone like a viola, but with more power and projection. I can't tolerate a shrill piercing E string in my ear. It's just too painful for me. It turned out that many other players were also looking for the voicing I strive for, since I am now building fiddle #106, and all the rest (except for the one I happen to be playing at the time) have found good homes all over the country, as well as in other countries.

I guess the all-time standard in voicing that I strive for is Stuart

Duncan's fiddle. I'm sure a lot of it is in Stuart's playing, but his fiddle has that ultimate tone I love to hear. As far as design goes, I model my fiddles after a particular old Derazy fiddle that the late Randy Howard once showed me. It was in need of repair, so we took the top off, and we were able to take detailed measurements of all the parts and dimensions. That fiddle also had carvings on the center bout wings and back plate that I sometimes copy on my fiddles.

Each of my fiddles has had its own unique voice. I am told by other players that they all seem to have a common "family" voicing that they can recognize when they hear one of them. There is not any one magic secret that results in the tone I achieve. It's a combination of many variables that all need to be a certain way for it to happen. It's the sum of all of its parts. I believe it starts with knowing the individual stock of wood for each fiddle, and arching, carving, and graduating that piece of wood according to its own nature of what it wants. It's more intuitive than objective. The measurements and standards called for in the violin making books are made to be broken.

I love to keep track of each of my fiddles and where they are. There has been hardly any turnover in their owners over the years. So a dream I have is someday to get in a motor home, and take a few months to travel all over the country and visit each of my fiddles, to hear what they have become after years of playing. (It would be nice to visit their owners, too.)

Presently, my challenge is with the five-string fiddles that I have been building. It is a whole different mind set and intuition in the design and voicing, compared to a four-string fiddle. So far, I have been very happy with my five-strings, based on what their owners have been telling me.

In the meantime, I am enjoying playing the fiddles that I am building. I play a lot of contra dances around North Carolina with the Kruger Brothers when they are not on tour, as well as with my other band, Wild Goose Chase. Another trio I play in is Musica Nostra, an acoustic swing and jazz band. Playing in these bands is a great opportunity to test out my new fiddles coming off the bench, to really see what they have.

Finding your dream fiddle can take a long time. I recommend trying out a fiddle for a week before finalizing a purchase. During that time, take it out to jam sessions where there are other instruments, and play all your favorite tunes on it. That's the only way to see what it has. If you are not quite sure of it, it's not the right fiddle for you. Don't go by others' opinions; it has to be a personal thing with each individual. If it sounds good to you, but is not set up well for playing, I do not recommend keeping it, thinking that all it needs is a better set-up. Most of the time, changing the set-up also changes its voice, and you may not like it anymore. Every little thing you do to a fiddle changes its tone in some way. Also, don't go for any statements that it just needs to be played a lot, and it will open up in a few weeks. If it doesn't have it when you are testing it, it's not going to have it later. There are fiddles out there that are hundreds of years old that still do not sound good.

Many fiddles sound better when they are tuned down a half step or whole step. When trying out a fiddle, make sure it's tuned up

to standard pitch. There are stories of players finding that perfect fiddle in a music shop, playing it for hours, being totally sure of it, then coming home with it to find it was tuned down. When they tune it back up to standard, it's a different fiddle with a harsh, strident tone. If you don't have a tuner with you, tune it to the dial tone on your cell phone. All phones globally have a dial tone that is an A 440 dominant pitch (there are other notes in the dial tone also, but the A note stands out).

Some fiddle shops have a lot of glass and mirrors in the rooms used to test out fiddles. This environment amplifies the power and resonance from the instrument. Take the fiddle to another room, or even outside to hear the true nature of the fiddle. Another variable to keep in mind is that there's a difference in what we hear if we're wearing a hat with a bill while playing a fiddle. Try taking the hat off to get a more pure room sound coming to your ears. Check the orientation of the bridge on the fiddle. Many bridges are tilted north towards the fingerboard from repeated retuning of the strings. Gently pulling the top of the bridge just a millimeter or so south can really improve the high end of the fiddle's tone.

All that said, the right fiddle for you should be one that already has a good set-up and playability, and also has a voice that speaks to your heart and soul. Highly flamed wood is certainly a pleasure to look at, but does not contribute to a fiddle's sound. Beware of being drawn to a spectacular-looking fiddle which may not have the voicing you desire, unless you're buying it as a collector's item.

I have seen many players struggling with fiddles that are difficult to play, and who blame themselves for not being able to improve and advance their playing ability. Many times the problem is not with the player but with the set-up of the fiddle. It is certainly a worthwhile minor investment to have your fiddle set up by a person who knows the fiddling style. This includes the fingerboard, nut, bridge, tailpiece, soundpost, and tuning pegs. As stated above, it may change its tone, but any fiddle that is hard to play will not help you enjoy your fiddling. You may already have that dream fiddle in your hands, after a good set-up!

My shop is north of Lenoir, North Carolina, south of Blowing Rock, in a community called Happy Valley, right where the legendary Tom Dooley (Dula) lived and died. It's an area rich in the heritage of old time mountain music for past generations. I enjoy having local pickers hang out and play fiddle tunes while I'm carving. It helps remind me of why I build fiddles. The shop is in my home. It's a converted basement with an outside entrance and plenty of natural light. My shop dog, Buster, can usually be found under my bench covered with wood shavings. He loves to gnaw on the maple cuttings and retrieve hand tools that I drop on the floor. (My tool handles all have teeth marks.)

For more information, email Bob at fiddlemaker@charter.net, or visit his website at <http://webpages.charter.net/koguts>.

[Bob Buckingham fiddles with the Blue Ridge Rounders and others, writes for Fiddler Magazine and other fine periodicals, and teaches an array of instruments and music courses in the Upstate of South Carolina and at Isothermal Community College in Polk County, North Carolina.]