I first heard some of Henry Reed’s tunes in a recording by the Hollow Rock String Band in the early ’70s. I did not know this band, nor had I ever heard of Henry Reed. As a matter of fact, I wasn’t familiar with any tune on that album. I thought Hollow Rock might have been a local string band from the 1920s, until I realized they were actually my contemporaries. They were students and folk musicians from the Durham, North Carolina, area, and their fiddler was a young graduate student, Alan Jabbour. Their repertoire came from many of the older local fiddlers and banjo players in the Southern Appalachians and Piedmont, including a remarkable Virginia fiddler named Henry Reed.

Alan Jabbour met Henry Reed through other fiddlers in West Virginia, and quickly discovered that this unique octogenarian, in Glen Lyn, Virginia, was a living link to a vast repertory of Virginia fiddling. He formed a friendship with Reed and his family which led to his recording and transcribing over one hundred-and-eighty tunes in six or seven recording sessions. Eventually, that collection would become a part of the Library of Congress Archive of Folk Culture, and, through bands like Hollow Rock, the tunes would enter the repertories of old time bands all over the country.

Alan worked at the Library of Congress for many years, first as head of the Archive of Folk Song (now the Archive of Folk Culture) and then as Director of the American Folklife Center. Now retired from that position, he continues to play fiddle and teach workshops in Appalachian fiddling at fiddle camps, folk festivals, colleges, and music schools throughout North America.

This interview was recorded for my radio program, The Fiddling Zone, in May, 2012, prior to a West Coast tour by Alan and banjo master Ken Perlman. It aired on May 14, 2012. Alan is a wonderful storyteller, as well as a great fiddler and folklorist, so a simple question could be an opening to many fascinating anecdotes and philosophical observations. We started out talking about his original meeting with Henry Reed, and ended up discussing the future of fiddling in America. And this was only a half-hour interview!

In addition to his published recordings in the LP era, Alan Jabbour has recorded two CDs of the music of Henry Reed, and others. The first one, A Henry Reed Reunion, featured Alan on fiddle, former Hollow Rock musician Bertram Levy on banjo and concertina, and Henry Reed’s son, James, on guitar. A second album, Southern Summits, features Alan on fiddle and Ken Perlman on banjo. Alan has also completed a book of written transcriptions of the forty-five Henry Reed fiddle tunes on these two CDs, called Fiddle Tunes Illuminated. Both CDs and the book are available through Alan’s website: www.alanjabbour.com.
“[Henry Reed had] preserved this great old Virginia repertory that virtually everyone else had forgotten. He had it all, he played all those tunes, actually hundreds of them. It was an amazing experience!”

Meeting Henry Reed

Tell us how you met Henry Reed. I know you were a graduate student back in the mid-’60s at Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina, and you were already collecting a lot of tunes from local fiddlers and other musicians. How did you hear about Henry Reed?

My wife and I were on a car trip in West Virginia, visiting Oscar Wright and his son Eugene Wright. They were wonderful musicians. Oscar played fiddle and banjo and sang with a high tenor voice. He played old time tunes—in fact, he was playing a lot of tunes I’d never heard before. I asked him where he got these unusual tunes, and he said, “Oh these tunes come from ‘old man Henry Reed’.” Well, I imagined he was talking about someone long since passed away, and I said something to that effect. And he said, “Oh, no! Last I heard, he was still around. He’s ten or fifteen years older than me, but he’s still playing the fiddle, as far as I know.”

So, he gave us directions to Glen Lyn, Virginia, which is right across the border from Princeton, West Virginia, and Karen and I drove there and met Henry Reed. We had a great session. I recorded about forty tunes that evening, and at least half of them were tunes I’d never heard before. Not because he made them up, but because he’d preserved this great old Virginia repertory that virtually everyone else had forgotten. He had it all, he played all those tunes, actually hundreds of them. It was an amazing experience!

How old was Henry Reed at that time?

He must have been about eighty-one. He was born in 1884 and died in 1968. That meant that he learned his repertory from long before radio and records. In fact, he had already learned a lot of music by the turn of the century. He was also one of those musicians who acquired tunes wherever he went. He would play any tune that he liked, and so he added new tunes and didn’t forget the old tunes. He had a magnificent repertory. I recorded six or seven sessions with him, and at the last one, he had twenty more new tunes. We weren’t anywhere near the bottom of his repertory.

The Old Virginia Repertory

This represents a very old tradition. How far back do these tunes go, historically?

A lot of the tunes he played were included in a collection called Virginia Reels, published by a Virginia music master in 1839. This is one of our only windows into what fiddlers were actually playing in early 19th-century America. And Henry Reed was playing about half the tunes in that collection; this was the grand old Virginia repertory, going back to the late 18th and early 19th century. It was brought into the Appalachians by Virginia settlers who moved there in the 1840s. His own mentor, Quince Dillion, was born in 1826 and moved up with his family from the Danville, Virginia, area, up into the mountains in the 1840s. That gives you a sense of how deep that tradition is. Quince Dillion played fiddle, but he also played fife before and during the Civil War. This man was born in the Jacksonian era, and died in 1903, but before he died, he taught a lot of music to Henry Reed. I like to see myself at the end of a long time-line, from today, 2012, going back to 1826; and right there in the middle is this man Henry Reed.

You knew Henry Reed as an old man, but did he play a lot in his younger days, and where did he play?

He played parties and dances, and he was well known in the local region. Everyone knew about him. His house was always thought of as a place where musicians could go, and there would always be music. He would welcome anyone, stayed up all night and played tunes, and then went off to work the next morning. So, that was the way he was. Everybody knew him locally, but he never recorded or played professionally with a band. His fame was only local, and by the time I knew him, people were saying “You should have heard him twenty years ago.” He had developed a tremor that interfered with his playing, and you could hear that on some of my recordings.

Recordings and Transcriptions of Henry Reed’s Tunes

How can people access these tunes?

It’s on the Library of Congress website. It’s entitled Fiddle Tunes of the Old Frontier: The Henry Reed Collection (www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/reed/). It’s everything I recorded of him, warts and all! If he was shaky that day, that’s the way it is.

How many tunes did you finally record?

144 different tunes, but there were fragments of other tunes and repeats. Maybe it was over 180 items. If I had three more years, I probably could have doubled that figure. I was a grad student and I loved doing this, but I had other things I had to do, too. And people often ask me if I got [school] credit for this, or if I had a grant. But, no, I did not have a grant and I didn’t get any credit. I just carved out the time to do this. It was exciting and changed my life.
I think it changed the lives of a lot of fiddlers, because a whole new generation of fiddlers came along and learned these tunes. If you hadn't recorded those tunes from Henry Reed, and played them with your own group, the Hollow Rock String Band, maybe a lot of those tunes would have been lost. Now they're being played by fiddlers everywhere.

It's wonderful seeing that happen. These tunes deserve to be played. I think it's due to the merit of the tunes, but it was also the right thing for the movement at the right time. People were trying to learn fiddle or banjo and learn instrumental music during that time, in the '60s. But one of the things they were looking for was a repertory. And here was this grand repertory from Virginia that was alive and well in the hands of this living fiddler. Not just the tunes, but the bowing patterns and all the sensuous surface of the tunes that make them come alive. Henry Reed was able to give that to me and ultimately to all of us.

Did you transcribe any of these tunes?

I did. In fact, the website of the Library of Congress has my transcriptions along with the tunes, and my notes. They photocopied it and reproduced it. You can see it all on the website.

The Library of Congress, Archive of Folk Culture

And what was your actual job at the Library of Congress?

I was head of the Archive of Folk Song, set up by Robert W. Gordon in the 1920s, and continued into the 1930s and '40s by John and Alan Lomax. That Archive was part of the Music Division of the Library of Congress, and I was working at the Archive to produce an album of American fiddle tunes. That Archive is now part of the American Folklife Center, created in 1976. The name was later changed to Archive of Folk Culture, and it was a wise decision to change the name, because "folk culture" represents a broader sense than just music, such as oral history, verbal traditions, folkways. Now they have a huge documentary collection there.

Did you continue to play fiddle during the years you worked at the Library?

I never stopped playing, but it was a busy time. I was trying to run a folklife center, organizing projects, traveling, doing fundraising, going to hearings, and also trying to raise a family. But that was similar to what happened to a lot of fiddlers I knew. They often had a young, energetic period, learning their art, playing out and around, and so on. Then they would have a kind of "middle period," raising a family, working a day job. And then they would start music again as they got older. So, I guess I’m following a kind of primordial cultural rhythm. The kids grew up and moved out of the house, and I retired, and music came back to the fore again. And I’ve been playing a lot of music. It’s been a very happy time. I’m not doing it full-time, because I’m also doing folklore research on various projects with my wife. Life is great for an old fellow like me.

Teaching Fiddling; The Old Time Fiddling Revival

When I met you last, you were teaching a workshop at the Montana Fiddle Camp in 2002. Are you still doing a lot of teaching?

I’ve been doing quite a bit of it, and I love teaching. Like the old-timers I recorded, I’ve become an old-timer, myself, and I’m happy to be sharing that with young musicians. I love performing, too, and I’ve also made two CDs, and I might even make another.

You did a CD with Henry Reed’s son, James, who recently passed away. It was called “A Henry Reed Reunion.” That CD also featured Bertram Levy, one of your old bandmates from the Hollow Rock String Band. I love that album and I play it a lot on this show.

I love it, too. The other album is called Southern Summits, and features Ken Perlman on banjo. And I recently came out with a new book which contains transcriptions of all the tunes on both albums, complete with bowing patterns, fingerings, double stops, drone notes, ornaments, and other stylistic features.

What’s the name of the book and where can one buy it?

The name of the book is Fiddle Tunes Illuminated: 45 Tunes Transcribed and Annotated for Stylistic Study. It was transcribed in (Continued on page 8.)
The Devil's Box is a fast paced jam-packed look at the world of contest fiddling. Every year contestants from all over the United States flock to the town of Hallettsville, Texas, to compete for the title of Best Texas-style fiddler. Featuring performances from some of the greatest legends of American roots music, The Devil's Box explores the beginnings of the art form and showcases the rising talents that will dominate the traditional music scene for years to come. The Devil's Box is an instant classic, filled with fantastic music and great family fun.

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detailed musical notation by Liberty Rucker and myself. And you can find it and buy it right on my website: www.alanjabbour.com.

Are these tunes in standard tuning, or do you play some of them in cross-tuning?

I didn’t use any cross-tunings on the first CD I made, Henry Reed Reunion. But on my second CD, with banjo player Ken Perlman, I did record four of them. [Henry Reed] didn’t actually use that many cross-tunings in his playing. He told me a story about that and why he tended to avoid cross-tunings. When he was a young man, he and his brother used to play in the coal camps in West Virginia, and played music for parties, dances, etc. But he told me that it was kind of a rough crowd and they didn’t want to wait around while he retuned. So he decided he would relearn the cross-tuned pieces in standard tuning. But he understood the idea of cross-tuning. The old scordatura tunings, as music historians call it, are still going strong in fiddling. Some fiddlers have invented whole new tunings for the instrument. But the reason for doing that isn’t just the convenience of making certain tunes

Henry Reed’s Favorite

From Alan Jabbour’s Fiddle Tunes Illuminated and played on Southern Summits (Alan Jabbour and Ken Perlman). Notes: “Learned from Henry Reed, who is our sole source for this tune. Henry Reed had no name for it. It happened that he played it twice for me on different occasions, so when Ken Perlman and I were preparing to put it on our album Southern Summits, I gave it this title... The tune is crooked, consisting of a short first strain (two long phrases) and an irregular second strain (three long phrases). But its irregularity is not a matter of chance variation on Henry Reed’s part. Since I recorded his playing the tune on two different visits to his home, and both performances have the same phrase structure and the same number of beats, we can say that the crookedness reflects exactly how he envisioned the tune.”
easier to play. It’s not really about that. I think most fiddlers I’ve talked to say that it creates a whole different sound: the overtone system is completely different.

Over the years, there’s been a tremendous revival of old time fiddling. Places like Clifftop, West Virginia, and Galax, Virginia, are more popular than ever before, filled with young musicians playing old time music. What do you think of this new revival?

I think it’s wonderful. I remember having this feeling of despair back in the ’60s that something beautiful was about to die out. But I didn’t have the confidence to realize as a young man that things that looked like they were dying out sometimes come back again. And that’s exactly what’s happened. Fiddling has come back and is embraced by everyone. Now, everyone is doing it. Even classical musicians are flocking to learn to play the fiddle. And they’re not just doing it because it feels like slumming; they have a multicultural view of their art now; they can see how different ways of playing can produce different aesthetic results.

Classical Violin and Fiddling: “The Judicious Use of Scratchiness”

I teach many classical violinists at my workshops. It’s fun teaching them. Of course, these people have all the basic skills they need, and they’re happy to play classical music, but they’re also looking to play with a different style, speak with a different voice. And to do that, they need to think differently about the aesthetics of what they’re producing: the bowing patterns, certainly, and what I call “the judicious use of scratchiness,” which I think is important in fiddling. All fiddling is in a way a mixture of scratch and music. Every time you change direction with the bow, you create some articulation: in effect, a kind of a scratch. And the total pattern of the scratches creates part of the music. It’s not just the notes; it’s a way of approaching those notes, a style. I love to see young people get into that, and get into it deeply. Who knows where they will take it?

I see a lot of colleges are starting to recognize fiddling in their curricula, offering workshops and courses. Fiddlers like Mark O’Connor are beginning to create entire new ways of teaching the fiddle in the schools.

Music schools are not far behind. I guarantee it. I’ve taught several classes in music schools and it’s really exciting to see the changes happening. Some people worry about it, and say, “They’ll change it all.” I don’t know. These forces are too large. It’s like surfing; you can’t control the wave.

You just try to ride it. Thank you for your comments and your wonderful stories, Alan.

For more information: www.alanjabbour.com

[Gus Garelick is a fiddler, mandolin player and radio programmer in Santa Rosa, CA. His band, The Hot Frittatas, plays an eclectic variety of music, including Italian and French café music, and more. He is also the Music Director of the Gravenstein Mandolin Ensemble, and the producer of The Fiddling Zone, aired on KRCB FM in Santa Rosa.]
Billy in the Low Land

From Alan Jabbour's *Fiddle Tunes Illuminated* and played on *Southern Summits* (Alan Jabbour and Ken Perlman). Notes: “Learned from Henry Reed, who called it the ‘East Virginia’ or ‘Franklin County’ Billy in the Low Land. This is an old Virginia tune, appearing in George P. Knauff’s *Virginia Reels* (1839)... The bowing of Billy in the Low Land is a fine example of the long-bow technique I acquired from Henry Reed, which is actually an artful mixture of groups of three, groups of two, and groups of separate strokes.”
In Memoriam

Tim McCarrick (1962-2012)

Long-time Fiddler Magazine contributor Tim McCarrick died December 16, 2012, after a three-year battle with cancer. He is survived by his wife Marybeth and his two daughters, Erin and Kathleen.

Tim worked as an Orchestra and Music Technology Editor for J.W. Pepper for fifteen years. He had previously worked as an orchestra and jazz band conductor and as a music director. Tim created several orchestral arrangements which are performed by youth orchestras in the U.S. and abroad. He was adept at several stringed instruments, including fiddle and guitar. Wanting to share his love for Irish music, Tim ran the website www.Irishfiddle.com.

Tim contributed many excellent interviews to Fiddler Magazine over the years, including the Kane Sisters, Seamus McGuire, Matt Brown, Oisín MacDiarmada, the Fiddlers Harmonic, Maeve Donnelly, and Gerry O’Connor. We will miss his writing and interviewing skills, his musical knowledge, his helpfulness, and his willingness to take on any assignment. On a more personal front, I will miss his kindness, his great sense of humor, and his courage.

— Mary Larsen

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