Alan Jabbour: Fiddler, Scholar, and Preserver of Tradition

By Steve Goldfield

Alan Jabbour has long been an integral part of the preservation of old time fiddling in America. Beginning his professional life as a professor of English Literature and Folklore, Alan soon moved into the musical arena, eventually becoming head of the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress, director of the Folk Arts program at the National Endowment for the Arts, and then director of the American Folklife Center. As a member of the Hollow Rock String Band, Alan brought old tunes to new audiences, and his documentation of tunes from Henry Reed, the Hammons Family, and many others gave them a new life. Alan’s acclaimed recent album of fiddle and banjo duets with Ken Perlman is proof of a musical career still going strong.

Beginnings

In 1893, Alan Jabbour’s paternal grandfather set sail from Syria with a boatload of Arabian horses. He was bound for the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where the horses were to be in the Turkish Pavilion sponsored by the Ottoman Empire. That, by the way, was where legend says that Americans were introduced to Little Egypt and her famous “hootchy kootchy” belly dance. The exposition was supposed to be in 1892 (the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ first voyage) but was postponed, which Alan says is an original object lesson for bureaucrats who do not get their act together. Unfortunately, all the horses became ill during the voyage and were thrown overboard into the sea.

Alan’s grandfather arrived horseless and penniless and never did get to Chicago. He started an Arabic language newspaper in Brooklyn, where there is still a large Arab-American community, but eventually settled in Jacksonville, Florida. Grandfather Jabbour made many trips back and forth to Syria, where Alan’s father was born just after the turn of the century. After World War I, Alan’s father joined his father in Florida, where he ran a grocery store. Near the store was a boardinghouse run by Alan’s mother and his foster grandmother. Alan’s mother, Irma Williams Jabbour, grew up in rural north Florida; Alan says her people referred to themselves as “Florida crackers.” Alan’s mother was essentially orphaned and sent to the state-run Ocala School for Girls, where a teacher befriended her and became her foster mother. The two women went to Jacksonville together. Alan’s foster grandmother, Essie Jane McCrary, grew up on a farm in Fall Branch, Tennessee, near the tristates area of east Tennessee around Johnson City, Kingsport, and Bristol. Alan was aware of southern old time music growing up, but he was not focused on it.

Alan’s father had played the lute-like oud in Syria, but Alan never saw him play it and he didn’t bring it to America. Danish missionaries in Syria had influenced the Jabbour family in the 19th century to become protestants, and when Alan’s father arrived in the United States, the closest church he could find to his beliefs was Presbyterian.

Alan was born on June 21, 1942, and grew up a block from the St. John’s River. Alan’s family sang a lot, and he sang in the church choir. His sister played clarinet and piano. When Alan was seven years old in the third grade, he was asked to join the school orchestra. He recalls being asked which instrument he wanted to play; he chose violin. Alan says he was not a prodigy but was talented and very good. He went to music camps, played classical music in orchestras, and became principal of the second violin section of the Jacksonville Symphony in his senior year in high school. He had gone to public school through the tenth grade but went to the Bolles school, a boys’ military school, for his last two years of high school. He found it more challenging and says that was where he budded both musically and academically.

There was a flowering of music at the time in Jacksonville. There were other young musicians like Alan, and they started a chamber music series with public concerts in the summer months. It was a big deal in town, he recalls.

Alan did not want to become a professional musician so, in his own words, he “chose something more practical.” He majored in English Literature at the University of Miami, which he attended between 1959 and 1963. He came to love writing. He had
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a scholarship to play in the Miami Symphony and the University of Miami String Quartet, which performed in local schools with Alan playing second violin. In his senior year he taught classical violin to kids of ages nine to sixteen.

Alan’s First Encounters with Traditional Music

One of the music camps Alan had attended was the Transylvanian Music Camp at the Brevard Music Center in North Carolina near Asheville. A friend of Alan’s from that camp, Shelly Morgenstern, started a new camp — the Eastern Music Camp in Greensboro, North Carolina; Alan helped set it up. His girlfriend in Miami, Karen Singer, came to camp, and they were married at the end of it. Alan and Karen went to graduate school together at Duke. Alan again majored in English with a specialty in medieval literature. One of his first classes at Duke was a seminar on the ballad taught by Holger Nygard, who was a folklorist and a medievalist. Alan had been exposed to the folk music revival in Miami; Nygard’s seminar immersed him in ballads and collecting folklore.

Alan wrote his master’s thesis on the collection and analysis of folk songs in the British Isles and America. Holger Nygard also played Library of Congress records. Alan recalls, “I was smitten. There was something culturally powerful in that music. I wrote off and got some for myself and listened to them over and over again. I had the idea that because of my special knowledge of the violin, I should collect folk fiddling.”

Alan bought a cheap tape recorder and started in north Durham County in 1965. He stopped at a gas station/country store and asked if there were any fiddlers around. Within a few minutes, he met Edsel Terry, who played fiddle and banjo. Terry was fairly young at the time and is the only one of Alan’s early mentors who is still alive. Terry encouraged Alan to try playing the music himself and turned Alan’s visits toward apprenticeship.

At the time, Alan had not played his violin for about a year. He began learning tunes from his new mentors. He had to relearn both his instrument and a new way to learn — by ear. Classical musicians use their ears, but they also rely on printed music. Now Alan had only his ears. The tape recordings helped, too. Alan’s recorder was reel to reel with different speeds. He played the recordings back at half speed, which gave him time to hear what was happening, especially bowing patterns. At the same time, his transcriptions helped him see what underlay this style of music. At first, his learning went slowly but then it came faster.

At about the same time, Alan met Bertram Levy, who was in the next building at Duke. Bertram was playing with Tommy and Bobbie Thompson, who lived just outside Durham. The Thompsons were also from Jacksonville but had not known Alan there. Bertram was from New York but had lived in Atlanta. Tommy was playing a sort of bluegrass-style banjo, but he was also aware of what Edsel Terry called “knocking the banjo,” or clawhammer. Alan, Bertram, and the Thompsons started to play together and share tunes that Alan was collecting and learning. All of them were very interested and engaged in the music. They did not have a plan; it just happened. Interest turned to enthusiasm and then passion. They got together every week.

Alan began taking trips further west and then northwest. He also went to fiddlers’ conventions. The first one was in Pulaski, Virginia, and then he went to Galax in 1966. The four started going as a band, and they played on stage and jammed. They had to invent settings for the tunes, which Alan had collected from solo fiddlers. Because they were performing, they needed a name. They came up with Hollow Rock String Band, after the rural community outside Durham where Tommy and Bobbie lived.

The Thompsons’ house became a gathering place. A scene was developing. Alan says it was “an exciting thing to feel that happening.” Some of the people who participated were Malcolm and Vickie Owen, Blanton Owen, who was still in the service and came from Fort Bragg, and Eric Olson. There was a newer circle which included Bill Hicks and Jim Watson. They also started dances. Bill Camp, who now lives in Sacramento, and who was majoring in sociology and interested in labor organizations, organized and called square dances at people’s houses. Occasionally, the band would play for public events, such as the Duke homecoming. Margaret Nygard was active in saving the Eno River; the band entertained at some of her events. The river was preserved, and there is now a park and festival there.

Alan remembers a growing interest in ecological issues. He says that “music history is important, but it has a setting in wider cultural history from searching for my grandparents whom I never knew to dealing as a white southerner with civil rights. What do you preserve and what do you pitch out?” During his collecting, however, he did not encounter any black fiddlers. He thinks that was because he was visiting white country stores but also because there were not many left.

Two of the fiddlers Alan recorded were Joseph Aiken and his brother Romy. The Durham Morning Herald ran a feature article on Alan’s collecting with a picture of Alan with Joseph Aiken. Joseph Aiken’s greatgrandson Clay, incidentally, is now a famous rock star, and Alan is back in touch with the family.

Benjamin Franklin Jarrell, known as B. F., was working just north of Durham in Roxboro as a DJ. He saw the picture in the paper and then recognized Alan at Galax. He introduced himself and said, “You ought to see my daddy.” Tommy Jarrell came to Galax the next day but did not have his fiddle. So Alan and Karen stopped to visit him in Toast, North Carolina, near Mount Airy, on their way home.
Alan was the first person outside Tommy Jarrell’s community to visit him. He recalls that Tommy was no longer working for the state highway department but had his last check from that job on his wall. He refused to cash the check even though they begged him to do so to clear their books. Tommy was then in the transition from mourning his wife into bachelorhood. Tommy came to find a new function in life by teaching his music to a new generation of young people. He was very influential both because of his musical talent and because he was a warm and available teacher. Alan did learn some of Tommy’s tunes, but he also played other versions, such as Taylor Kimble’s “Breaking up Christmas,” rather than Tommy’s.

Henry Reed

Whereas many fiddlers had versions of Tommy Jarrell’s tunes, Alan had to learn Henry Reed’s tunes from scratch because nobody else played most of his tunes. Alan met Oscar Wright at Galax. Oscar was playing great tunes. Alan asked to visit him in Princeton, West Virginia. Eugene Wright lived there, too. Oscar played “Kitchen Girl,” “Ducks on the Pond,” and other unique and wonderful tunes. Alan asked, “Where did you learn those?” “From old man Henry Reed,” the Wrights explained. Alan assumed that Reed was long gone but was told that he was still alive and fiddling. Oscar Wright gave Alan directions to Glen Lyn, Virginia, where he found Henry Reed on the same trip. The Jabbour family arrived around suppertime and were invited to eat when the Reeds heard that Oscar had sent them. They did not even know why Alan had come.

The Reed family had roots in Ireland and in Floyd County along the Blue Ridge near Floyd, Virginia, but they had been in Monroe County, West Virginia, since the mid-19th century. Quince Dillion, Henry Reed’s principal mentor, was also from “East Virginia.” The Dillions had moved to Monroe County from Franklin County, Virginia, in the early 19th century.

The Reed home in Glen Lyn had the reputation in the community as a house where people came to play music. Sometimes Henry Reed played music all night and went to work the next day. He grew up in a farming area close to the New River.

Henry and his brother, Josh, went to the coal country two counties over seeking their fortune. They played music together. Coal camps were not all they had thought, so Henry came home. He got a job at the Appalachian Power Company in Glen Lyn, where coal was brought in by train and burned to generate electricity. He worked in the power plant for many years. Reed was tarnished in the view of management because he was involved in union organizing. They moved him around to try to get him to quit; he did not so they fired him.

Alan recorded about forty tunes on his first visit with Henry Reed. He says, “I knew that I had found my mentor for the future. He had a tremor in his hands, but a fiddler can hear through that.” Mostly Reed played his old repertoire, though his son James would comment about a few little changes. “Henry Reed was a huge influence on me for repertoire and style,” Alan asserts. “And through the wider circle in Durham, the tunes spread; they were the fuel for our music revival. Henry Reed was, for us, a dominant figure. He played great and unique tunes. He was the only one that remembered them. He was an amazing resource. He was not out of touch with the world; it was important to him to keep the music, so he did. He learned bluegrass and country western tunes, too. He learned what he liked.”

Alan visited Henry Reed seven or eight times and recorded during six of those visits. He recorded 184 items of which 144 were different tunes. During Alan’s last visit, Reed added more than twenty tunes, so he probably knew more.

Alan visited Taylor Kimble two or three times. He had also just lost his wife, and music cheered him up. Alan remembers that Taylor “met Stella Holladay through us young people. They courted, married, and learned each other’s repertoires and played together in their seventies.”
Alan wishes he could have visited Grey Craig, who learned from Posey Rorer, more than once. He also visited Doc White and Lee Triplett in West Virginia only once. He says, “It was important in that era to visit fiddlers because only those in their seventies and eighties still retained music from before outside influences seeped in after World War I. The new directions cut off a lot of local repertoire which fell gradually into disuse.”

Alan recalls, “I was more pessimistic then about the future of the fiddle in the South than I am now. I’ve seen a revolution in interest in old time fiddling. First, people like me and then later other people and now young generations in those communities. People from Gray Craig’s area ask what he was like. I’m humbled that I became willy nilly part of the chemistry of that. In the long run, these things have cultural impacts, when you look back, enriching and beneficial impacts.”

**Alan’s Career in Folklore**

Alan had gone to UCLA in 1968 and taught English literature and folklore. Rae Korson, head of the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress, invited Alan to edit a new album on American Summer 2006

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**Ducks in the Pond**

Transcribed by Alan Jabbour as played by Henry Reed. (Letters refer to alternate measures displayed at the bottom of the tune.)

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Variations:

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fiddle tunes. Alan had done research at the Archive in 1966 and 1967. Alan also was in Washington for the first Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in 1967 and returned in 1968.

Harold Spivacke, chief of the Music Division at the Library, came to Los Angeles. Spivacke had been Alan Lomax’s boss in the 1930s. He phoned Alan and wanted to meet him. They talked for more than an hour, which Alan remembers surprised him. Suddenly, Spivacke said, “Rae Korson is going to retire soon. I wonder if you would be interested in being head of the Archive of Folk Song” (which became the Archive of Folk Culture). Alan accepted and held that position from 1969 to 1974.

That was a period of great ferment in folklife work. Alan says, “Keep the tradition and the tradition-bearers front and center: That policy was formulated then. I was a bureaucrat. But, by the 1980s, one could not so easily distinguish locals from outsiders. There was a formal debate at the American Folklore Society on this issue: Should revivalists be allowed to play at a folk festival? That’s the wrong question: not whether I should be allowed or not. Rather, I should be there side by side with Henry Reed because both are part of the reality, and it teaches the people how they are related. That has happened some with Tommy Jarrell, for example. It was disheartening to see this debate, which was an important intellectual and cultural issue, turn into a nasty feud, not only among my friends but among people doing important work who were pitted against each other.”

In the spring of 1974, he became director of the Folk Arts Program at the NEA, and in September of 1976, Alan became head of the new American Folklife Center; aside from a stint as Assistant Librarian for Cultural Affairs, he held that position until his retirement in 1999.

The Hammons Family

Alan first heard about the Hammons Family from Bertram Levy, who was living in Port Townsend, Washington. Bertram went to Galax, where Dwight Diller talked about the Hammons family in Pocahontas County, West Virginia — his home. He persuaded Bertram to go back with him to Marlinton, and Bertram recorded Burl Hammons playing some fiddle tunes on a tape recorder. Then he went to Washington, D.C. and played some of it for Alan.

Alan was excited about visiting Burl and went down there one weekend. He found Burl, Maggie, Sherman, and Ruie — a whole musical family. Alan remembers that first visit: “I met Carl Fleischhauer from West Virginia University, whom I didn’t previously know. Carl had been dragged down there as a filmmaker by Pat Gainer, a senior folklorist who had heard from Dwight, who was a student at WVU, about a ballad singer, Maggie Hammons Parker. Carl was frustrated by the senior folklorist approach and came back when I was there. Dwight was also there: both pleased and anxious that the music be recorded properly. We smoothed things out eventually.”

Alan remembers, “We used our recordings and some of Dwight’s. Carl took still photos. The project emerged gradually. At first I wanted to document the Hammons for the Library.” Then Carl and Alan conceived of a large LP package with a booklet, music, and stories that gave a broader picture of the family tradition at large. Alan continues, “Carl researched census records and county courthouse records. Piecing that together with the oral history, we were able to present a compelling picture of this family, how they emerged on the frontier in the late 18th century and kept working their way along the frontier. They had a hunting and gathering way of life. They needed woods readily available. They were known as woods people who knew the woods better than everyone else. They were the woods guides for hunters.”

Alan did not know about the recordings of Edden Hammons, the uncle of those he visited, at that time in the early seventies. In the early eighties, the Louis Chappell recordings became known. Chappell was anxious about who would have his recordings. He wanted them to go to WVU and not to the Library of Congress. Alan observes, “That was my last big fiddling project that led to a publication. Administrative tasks occupied my full attention. I was doing less fiddling as well. Months would go by where I wouldn’t touch it. I was keeping the American Folklife Center afloat and occupied raising a family.”

“I was more pessimistic then about the future of the fiddle in the South than I am now. I’ve seen a revolution in interest in old time fiddling.”
Alan adds, “The good news is that when you get past all that you get to go back to the creative life. I retired at the end of 1999, which has enabled me to go back to those things. I am doing some folklore research projects. One of them is part of an environmental impact statement in the Smokies in North Carolina. This study is about the tradition of cemetery decoration on Decoration Day in the Smokies. The history and shape of that tradition is part of the issue of building a road.”

Alan’s Active Retirement

Alan also says he is now playing music at least half time. Right now he is on the road with Ken Perlman. The two met at Rocky Mountain Fiddle Camp and started doing programs together, then touring and then a CD. Alan says it has been a lot of fun. Earlier Alan recorded a CD with Bertram Levy and James Reed — Henry Reed Reunion — and he also managed to reissue all the earlier recordings. Alan also plays occasionally with Jim Watson, who was the third musician on the second Hollow Rock album. Alan played four cuts on Jim’s recent solo recording.

With Ken, their music emerged gradually. Alan says, “Ken had to work out some things. He had to do more, but I had to adjust to him, too. Why not play a tune on the lower octave as well as the upper? I tried it out and it sounded good. I like doing that. Inevitably, little textural details are adjusted based on your banjo player though he’s adjusting more. The two voices are unconflicted with other things like a guitar. You can hear it more cleanly when it’s just the two. Fiddle and banjo duets are hard to find on record, despite the rhetoric about fiddle and banjo being building blocks of Southern music.”

Alan went out to Port Townsend, Washington, to play at the first Festival of American Fiddle Tunes started by Bertram. He saw it as a continuation of the Durham/Chapel Hill scene. He says, “Bertram was seeding West Coast culture. That set in motion festivals oriented to teaching the “in group” rather than the broader public. It was what went on in the parking lot at fiddler’s conventions, not at the stage. The public face of it was almost an afterthought. There are a whole host of camps that Fiddle Tunes led to.” Now Alan teaches at many other camps around the country.

People who have talked about the Hollow Rock String Band (Tommy Thompson was interviewed) said that Alan had a very precise idea of what he was trying to do. Alan had an internal sense of what it should be like. Partly it was people he encountered; partly he invented a way of playing old time music in interesting ensemble arrangement. He observes, “You just had to invent it. Henry Reed taught me ‘Red Fox’; we had to make up the chords. I decided it starts in D but is really in G. That’s how Jim Watson and Tommy and I had recorded it in the early 1970s. Ken had not heard that. Ken tried it with an A chord on the first note. I actually liked it. He says he was just messing around and joking. We kept that in our performances. We played it a lot recently in the UK because there’s a big controversy about fox hunting.”

Alan started listening to the older commercial recordings later, such as the great County Records reissues, after he had developed
his own style. He comments, “I also love bluegrass and have been a Ralph Stanley fan since the 1960s. We didn’t learn from records. I learned from people and my friends learned from me. I only remember a few recordings from which I learned versions of tunes. I remember hearing a ‘Stony Point’ with a different third part than Henry Reed does. I turned a three-part tune into a four-part. Now a lot of people play it that way. That was an example of picking something up from a 78 record, but it was the exception.”

When asked about the influence of the New Lost City Ramblers, Alan responded that “Tommy [Thompson] was aware of the NLCR. When they played in Chapel Hill in 1967 or 1968, that was the first time I heard them. But by then, we already had our repertory and our style together. I can’t say that they influenced me. They might have influenced Tommy and the Red Clay Ramblers later. They were trying to reproduce the performance. We were learning tunes and then developing a way to perform them.”

Alan tried to put this into a context: “Charlie Poole was a young kid introducing, as country songs, songs that came from elsewhere in new and modern settings. We were modern in inventing chords and an ensemble sound.”

Alan reminisces, “We didn’t do it because it was important; our hearts led us that way. We put a lot of tunes back into the repertoir. It was an hourglass, one grain at a time getting through. Now it’s back to the world. We helped to reinvent the whole idea of old time ensemble playing. We’re not the only ones, but we helped to set that into motion with all the bands that followed us in the Durham area and beyond. Within five years people all over the country were doing it. It was in the air ready to crystallize. It is humbling that I had a part in it but no one person’s part is as great as everybody’s contribution to a cultural tradition in a new life and a new century.”

www.alanjabbour.com
Henry Reed website: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/hrhtml/hrhome.html

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### Discography and Videography

- **The Hollow Rock String Band: Traditional Dance Tunes.** Compact-disc recording with accompanying booklet, reissued in CD format from the original LP recording (1968), County Records CO-CD-2715. 1997.
- **Learning Old-Time Fiddle Appalachian Style with Alan Jabbour: 10 Easy Pieces, an Interview, and Tune Transcriptions.** Amherst, MA: In the Groove Workshops, 2003. Instructional video in both DVD and VHS editions, with an accompanying brochure.
- **Southern Summits.** Privately published CD recording. Alan Jabbour, fiddle, Ken Perlman, banjo, 2005.

### Selected Fiddle-related Publications

- “From the Record and Film Review Editor: Recent Records of Ralph Stanley,” *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 87, no. 344 (April-June 1974), 184-188.
- “From the Record and Film Review Editor: Georgia Hillbilly Reissues,” *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 87, no. 345 (July-September 1974), 266-269.

### Produced Recordings