Johnny Gimble has been entertaining audiences around the world for over five decades. Now 69 years old, he still displays the infectious enthusiasm for performing that has been his trademark all his career. One of the few true giants of the fiddling world, he has performed with many of the biggest names in the music industry, including Bob Wills, Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard and has won two Country Music Association Instrumentalist Of The Year Awards. Gimble has long been recognized as the leader of his field — his playing has been the most studied of any fiddler in the western swing style. Gimble’s solos reflect a life-long pursuit of improvising, with endless variations that always seem the perfect embodiment of this genre. This interview took place in March 1995.

Born in Texas in 1926, Johnny Gimble was one of nine children, all musically inclined and basically self-taught. Among the nine of them, the boys played guitar, fiddle, mandolin, and jug.

Could you tell me a little about how you got started?

By the time my older brothers Bill and Jack joined the Navy, we were playing some gigs, making two dollars a day playing all day Saturday for a flour company, in a cheap imitation of the Light Crust Doughboys [an early version of Bob Wills’ Texas Playboys]. That’s how it all started. I had an uncle John, who played a little old mandolin, he played “Washington Lee Swing” out on the front porch. And then Uncle Paul Gimble played the fiddle, had an old sorry fiddle that hung on the wall and a bad mandolin, and he played “Blue Ridge Mountain Home” and “Bully of the Town...” The live music just thrilled me, from the time I first heard it. And then, of course, recorded music thrilled me, after I heard it. So we learned kind of catch as catch can. When we did get a radio when I was ten years old, we’d listen to the Light Crust Doughboys every day. Consequently, I played a lot of tunes wrong — we picked them up as we could hear them. Then, after we got a record player, we could set the needle back and listen a little closer and learn from it.

So never in this period did you have instruction of any kind...

Well, only from other fiddlers. I had a cousin, Richard Stanley, who played the “Joe Turner Blues,” and he showed us that, and then there’s a guy who had been a professional recording fiddler, Huggins Williams, H.D., a left-handed fiddler — everybody called him Lefty — lived out at Lynndale, about twenty mile drive away. We’d go over and see Lefty and he’d help us learn how to shuffle the bow. He had played on records in the twenties — this was about ten years after that. So we learned “Beaumont Rag” and songs like that from him. I guess when I was about eleven or twelve years old, my brother Bill got a record player. He traded a 45 pistol for a combination automatic record player, an old Brunswick job. I didn’t realize for ten or twenty years that that thing was playing a whole tone sharp. I had a record of Bob Wills playing “Carolina in the Morning,” and he did a real tricky thing on it. It was in D. I’d sit and play with it — it was real fast, but I didn’t know that the record player was fast. Ten years later I was playing with Bob, and he played it in C, and at a real relaxed tempo. Anyway, that was the way we learned. When I got records of Cliff Bruner — “Draggin’ the Bow” and “I’ll Keep on Loving You” and those things he did in 1938... He was the number one fiddle player in the world from then on until I heard J.R. Chatwell in ’43, and then there was a tie for first place. J.R. was really a jazz-swing fiddler. And that was the direction we went. We heard the Light Crust Doughboys, we heard the Shelton Brothers, with Jimmy Thomason playing fiddle.

My brothers and I had a radio show when I was about thirteen. Three times a week we’d play a fifteen minute show with Gene [Gimble] and Jerry [Gimble] and myself and another boy about Gene’s age named James Ivie, and James got the first electric guitar that we ever got to play on in about 1940, and we were listening to Zeke Campbell with the Doughboys playing electric lead guitar. Zeke was a big influence on George Barns, as well. We were trying to play like Zeke. [Later], when we all went in the service, James … was in the Navy on a bomber or something and was lost in the war. But we had this radio show for a couple of years I guess, and then we played parties around home. When I got out of high school, I went to play with the Shelton Brothers, when I was
seventeen years old, over in Shreveport [Louisiana]. KWKH radio. We played school shows and dances and a daily radio show early in the morning and then a noon show three times a week. It was really exciting for me. From there I went with Jimmy Davis when he campaigned for governor. I played tenor banjo for them. I was doubling tenor banjo and fiddle with the Shelton Brothers — The Sunshine Boys, they called their group. Then I went in the Army. Didn’t get to play except for my own amusement while I was in the service. I came out and the Gimble boys reunited and we formed The Blues Rustlers and had a radio show down in South Texas and played dances... Then in ’47 I went with Jesse James and the Gang at KPBC in Austin, which was the number one band in this area at that time, and from there to Corpus Christi with the Roberts Brothers Rhythmaires. These three brothers had this band and I married their niece, Barbara, and then I joined Bob Wills in ’49, and the rest is geography.

How exciting was that at the time to join Bob Wills? It sounds like you’d been listening to him since you were pretty small...

Yeah... His early records were of course an influence — we learned “Ida Red” and “Get Along Home Cindy” and those tunes, and I heard Jesse Ashlock playing fiddle with him. He did that real fast bow shuffle on “Beaumont Rag.” But as far as records in ’37 and ’38, I liked Cliff Bruner’s records much better because they had more... I don’t know what it was. The feel of it was Moon Mullican singing and Bob Dunn playing real jazzy steel guitar. And then about 1937 or ’38, Eldon joined the Wills band — Eldon Shamblin — and I think from there on they started playing a lot of harmony. We recorded “The Waltz You Saved For Me” with Merle Haggard in about ’72, and Eldon told us that that was the first record they ever used harmony fiddles on... He had to show them the harmony. It was Jesse, and I believe Sleepy Johnson who played tenor banjo, and Bob. And they came out with that real pretty harmony — it was Eldon’s influence on them. Of course, then Bob hired Louis Tierney, who was a great harmony man, and I loved Louis’ solos, too. About that time we listened to everything they made, every record that came out. In Texas, you learned every record that Bob Wills ever made.

Would you actually learn the solos?

No. We tried to play it different every time. “I remember Jack [Gimble] telling me one night in ’47 — we had our little band and we were going home from a gig, and he told me, “I was real disappointed in you tonight.” I said, “Why?” He said, “You played something just like you did last night.” So that was our aim — to never repeat. I found out when I went on the Wills band, Tiny Moore said that Bob wanted you to play all that you knew — he wanted you to knock him out and surprise him. Then at the same time we had so many lead instruments with Bob’s band that you didn’t get as many solos. I remember sitting next to Tiny and hearing him rehearsing with his volume off. When somebody’d be playing, he’d be sitting there going over something and then he’d play it. That was a bring-down to me. I thought everything he did was right off the cuff.

Years later, Georgia Slim played me a Joe Venuti break that he did on a song called “Wild Dog” or “Wild Cat” or “Canebrake” or something. I tried to figure it out... anyway, it was the same thing that Louis played on either “Miss Molly” or “Take Me Back to Tulsa.” And I sort of worked it out to play it for Merle Haggard. He wanted me to be Louis when we made that 1970 album. I never did get to be myself except on one tune, maybe “Corrina,” I got a solo. But the rest of the time I was either being Bob or Louis.

At the time that album was made in 1970, there hadn’t been any Willis music recorded for years, so it was all new again. Merle said, “I don’t want to make this a duplicate of these old records, but I want to capture that feel.” He had all those old 78s on tape. And so we got the tempos and everything just about like the original records. And a year or two later we recorded “Cherokee Maiden” and my brother Jack, who grew up listening to every record that Bob ever made, he thought it was the original record when it came on the radio. But it was because he hadn’t heard the original record in twenty years. But you can play the new record of it, and then play Bob’s old cut, and it’s so much better — the soul, the spirit. We’d be recording, and if we didn’t get it in the first two or three takes, Bob would say, “Let’s get on to the next song — we’re losing the spirit.” We’d record the next song and go back and do the first one.捕捉的氛围，再次，这不是他们在工作室中制作的。

How was Bob Wills to work for?

He was sober the first year and a half, and he was great. You just played. He didn’t travel with the band, he rode in his own car — one of the guys would drive for him in his own car. Doing one-nighters, he would get to the town in the mid-afternoon and then rest some before the job. He was forty-five years old at that time. He was more like the general in the Army. He commanded a lot of respect. He had a great sense of humor — he liked to kid and cut up on the band stand.

So you would never hang out with him and play fiddles together informally...

No, on the band stand was the only time he ever picked up the fiddle. A lady asked him one time, “Mr. Wills, when do you find time to practice?” He said, “About thirty years ago.” I was thinking about J.R. Chatwell and Cliff Bruner, who were my two heroes. J.R. had a stroke when he was fifty-two years old, and it paralyzed his left hand and he couldn’t play anymore. I heard him tell somebody, “The only thing I ever done was play fiddle. I never worked a day job in all those years.” And Cliff, who was, to me, as good as anybody in the world playing the fiddle, when things slowed
down in the ’40s, he quit playing. The only time he played was on the band stand. He’d get a job maybe once a week. You know, it takes an hour to warm up. So his playing wasn’t as good in his later years as it was in his heyday. But J.R. just kept getting better and better to me.

But I agree with Chet Atkins. Chet says that if he doesn’t pick the guitar up every day, he gets to where he doesn’t remember anything.

So you still pick it up a lot and still practice...

Oh, yeah. It still amazes me. A while ago, when I was waiting for you to call, I probably wrote a tune. I don’t play anything in particular. Maybe it’s a breakdown, maybe it’s a waltz. That’s how I wrote those Waltzes. I’ve written four or five Waltzes that have a lot of double stops in them. I just fool with chords and turn a tape on. And when I’m driving to the post office, I’ll punch a tape in and hear it, and say, “Well, that’s a pretty good little old melody there.” It’s interesting to listen to yourself. The only thing wrong with that is, like you were saying a while ago, “Do you memorize things?” You get to where you play clichés of yourself. But I like to tape a dance when we play a job. And then you listen to it and amaze yourself. And it’s amazing, the things Curly does on the piano. Curly has never played anything the same way once. It’s new every time... That’s what’s good about jazz and swing.

Do you know much theory of improvising or do you just play intuitively?

I can dissect something I play. I can listen to it back and say, “I was playing an augmented there,” I know what I play. And as a result, you can remember what to play in different places. Like a flatted fifth — it fits in a two chord, you know, and it doesn’t sound right if you’re playing in a five chord — to me anyway. But then I hear these jazz players. Old Stuff Smith said, “If you hit a flat fifth, go ahead and dig in.” He said don’t mind what people think about it, you know. But yeah, I’m a student of theory.

Did you play very much contest fiddling back in your earlier days?

No, we used to go to Athens, Texas. There’s a contest every last weekend in May every year. We were playing in the band contest with our little group, rather than playing against the other fiddle players. We had our little Row City Swingsters we called it when we were on the radio. We won first place in 1940 in Crockett, Texas. They still have that contest every June. I had never really played breakdown contest fiddle enough to win. Then years later, when I was doing a day job in 1962, ’63, ’64, along in there, I worked at the V.A. hospital in Waco, cutting hair. I was in the barber shop, and just played weekends. I had a lot of weekends off, and I started going to those contests, just for the fellowship. I would enter, and I never did win anything. Vernon Solomon told me, “Pick you out about four or five breakdowns and really work on them and you’ll start winning gas money!” I enjoyed just being around those guys, and we’d jam. It was funny — every one of them wanted to play what I played. They all wanted to play swing or jazz. It was work to play breakdowns. But I went to play a square dance job with Vernon in Fort Worth, and I had him take “Sally Johnson” and “Leather Britches.” I can’t tell them apart. I had him tell me what they were when he did them, and then he did a couple in A that sound alike to me — “Dusty Miller” and something else. And I took them home and I worked on them and worked on them. It was like pulling teeth, trying to learn those damn things. But I got to where, like he said, I could win some gas money. In a way, I was like J.R. Chatwell. After he had his stroke and all, we were out at a hamburger place near Willie Nelson’s studio, and this lady had a book of old-time fiddling and pictures of these old guys, and she said, “Mr. Chatwell, maybe you know some of these guys.” He just sort of turned his back on her, and she repeated it, and he said, “Ma’am, I never did play breakdown fiddle. I didn’t have to.”

Do you do any teaching these days?

No. I have done some seminars and clinics, and I get calls from fiddle associations, and they’ll ask if I’ll come judge a contest. I don’t do that at all anymore. I’ve done it. The only one that’s happy is the winner, you know. But I’ll go to these things and perform, and sometimes help host them, and I’ll do a clinic and try to answer questions and show people how you do that augmented lick coming out of “Fiddling Around.” Just about everybody wants to know that. I had a class of about thirty or thirty-five fiddle players that were into learning improvisation and harmony and stuff that I do. I tried to teach them theory, teach them what makes a chord. If you’re going to play harmony, all you need to know is what goes into the chord. If somebody’s playing the melody, I just stay off the melody and play something else that’s in the chord, and it works. That’s how I play two-part harmony. There’s a fiddle player in Nashville, a black guy, he was an arranger and a great player. He said, “If it’s in the chord and it’s in tune, it’s okay.” So that’s my theory about that.

I’ll take a tune and get them to learn it in all the keys. That’s how I learned to play, by myself, when I was in the Army. I’d take some old song, and maybe play it in C, and go the fourth chord, play it in F, go to B flat, E flat, A flat, all the way around until I was back in C again. I did that to make myself use my little fingers. I had learned to play with just three fingers, like most people, because I didn’t have any instruction. I was playing ten years before they showed me how to hold a fiddle. When I was about seventeen years old, Jimmy Thomasson made me put my thumb under the neck of the fiddle instead of wrapping it around it, and I’d throw my elbow way under the fiddle.
I made an instruction video in '92 with my son Dick, who plays guitar and bass. I just got an 8 mm camera and Dick taped it, he’d get the tape going and come and sit down and play rhythm if I needed it. I’d just talk about how I learned to play and try to answer questions that I’ve been asked for the last thirty years. I try to show them how to figure out licks, why something sounds good, and show them the augmented and diminished, and where to use them. The theory end of it. [For a review of Johnny’s instructional videos, please see page 43.]

What are you doing now and how much are you playing? I saw you at the Strawberry Festival with the Playboys Two. Are you still doing that?

Well, Herb Remington booked that, and I booked some Playboy gigs, but it’s such as hassle getting everybody to the thing. And you have to charge so much. I’ve got a group called “Texas Swing” — “Johnny Gimble and Texas Swing.” Generally we just play with just five pieces. Myself, and Dick plays bass, Curly Hollingsworth plays piano, and Kenny Frazier is a real fine lead guitar player. My son-in-law, Joe Bullock plays drums. It’s just a little fun thing. We just did some recording, too. We went in the studio and recorded thirty songs, I guess. I did a bunch of original things and then a bunch of old things. I’m just going to put it out on my own label, “Tejas” (the old Spanish name for Texas) Records.

How often are you playing now?

It varies. For the past year, it’s been real busy. A lot of times I won’t play over three or four gigs in a month. I went up and played in Mountain Home, Arkansas, for an Ozark folk festival or fiddle festival a couple of years ago, and there was a guy there that started a show on public radio. It’s called “At Home in the Country.” He called and hired me to come up there and play on this show. It’s a weekly, one-hour show, every Saturday evening. It’s played on most stations around the country — over a hundred stations now. It’s mostly old mountain music, but they do a lot of modern songs, too. They’ve got a variety of acoustic music, and I go ahead and plug in and play electric mandolin and fiddle both. We tape six programs at a time, every six weeks. I book around those, and some months I’m busy every weekend. I went up to Branson [Missouri] last year and played at Silver Dollar City for a week. And I’m playing there again this year, taking my group — they put me with a bluegrass group last year.

Is bluegrass something that you’ve played with a little bit?

Well, I played on some bluegrass records in Nashville, but I’m not a bluegrass fiddler. It’s good music, but after about three tunes, I’ve heard enough for a while. [Laughter] That’s the way swing music is to those guys. Everybody has their own personal taste about music.

What do you think of the state of western swing now? Is it more popular than it was?

I thought Texas was the state where they were playing it, then I found out it was California, Oklahoma… I don’t know, Jack. I’ve always played what I play… It’s always been what they’re calling western swing. The reason I call my music Texas swing is because it’s not as organized as western swing. Western swing started off with fiddle bands, and then they added the horns, and it got to where they were playing big band arrangements. We do some of that. Kenny Frazier is a great jazz guitar player, and we work up some four-part things with electric mandolin and guitar. But mostly you start a tune with the melody, and Kenny plays the lead and I’ll play two parts on the fiddle and mandolin, then you have the vocal, and it’s every man for himself, you know — it’s Dixieland. That’s what Bruner’s band was like. That’s the reason I differentiate between Texas swing and western swing. I think that Texas swing is more like Dixieland, like Milton Brown’s old records. A lot more featured solos.

Asleep At The Wheel did this album that won a Grammy last year. We did “Red Wing.” And that won a Grammy and it was a Bob Wills tribute album, and I never did hear Bob play “Red Wing.” I recorded it on CMH on my Texas Fiddle Collection, and that’s exactly how we did it on the Wheel’s album. Ray Benson… used all these young “today” artists on that album and it gets some airplay, it gets it recognized again. When he started that project, he said, “You know, it’s been twenty years since Merle did that Bob Wills tribute,” because 1970 is when he did it. It got some play back then. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, they quit playing it, at the radio ranch anyway. That’s the reason Ray used that real heavy drum sound on this album — so they’d play it on the radio. But again, go get those old original records and compare them.
Quick Step Annie

By Johnny Gimble. Transcribed by Jack Tuttle as played by Johnny Gimble on his Still Fiddling Around album (MCA Records MCA-42021)

This catchy tune is a Gimble original. The B part begins in 3rd position and slides down into first position. The recording features an overdubbed 2nd fiddle in the B part which I have not included in this transcription.
Quick Step Annie (Swing Solo)

By Johnny Gimble. Transcribed by Jack Tuttle as played by Johnny Gimble on his Still Fiddling Around album (MCA Records MCAD-42021)

Here is Gimble swinging at his best with lots of off-beat phrasing and altered scale tones.

Blues for Dixie

Transcribed by Jack Tuttle as played by Johnny Gimble on Asleep At The Wheel’s Tribute to the Music of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys (Liberty Records CDP-7-81470-2) O.W. Mayo, Unichappell Music Inc. BMI

This solo fits over the first half of the verse. It begins in 3rd position. At the end of measure seven Gimble plays with a double-time feel for two beats. The ghost notes in measure eight are barely played — listen to the recording to get the feel.