

Why Hasn't Everyone Heard of Michigan Fiddling: Ethnocentrism in Folk Music.

By A. Trae McMaken

In the first decades of the 20th century, traditional folk music saw its sustaining social contexts come under siege by the automobile, the radio, and recordings. The professionalization as discussed by Philip Martin may have stopped some from playing music; for others, it changed the sights, sounds, places, and ideas of the musical experience.¹ Cowboy music arrived, along with the associated costumes.²

In the OMFA 1986 book, a biography is included of guitarist and multi-instrumentalist Robert Gille (b. 1916). In his biography, he wrote,

About this time I also started to sing country and western songs. My parents couldn't get me away from the radio when the W.L.S. barn dance was on the air. In later years, I played over a number of radio stations in the U.S. and Canada . . . I started playing for square dances at house parties when I was about 12 and by 17 was playing guitar and mandolin with a dance band. In 1936 I played with the floor show at the Grand Hotel at Mackinac Island and in 1953 played for square dancing in the ball room. I have played for dances in many different states . . .³

Included with the biography is a picture of Gille standing with guitar behind a CKLW microphone wearing shiny, show western attire with cowboy hat. The Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island is an iconic location for many Michiganders, even down to my own generation.

In his work *Old Time Music Makers of New York State*, a book which represents an early (1987) step in the right direction, Simon J. Bronner discusses the acceptance of a "hillbilly" persona among old time musicians in New York State, though he demonstrates that this "hillbilly" character was not necessarily connected with the South in the perceptions of at least one performer, but rather a rube character from the countryside of their own locale.⁴ Bronner's book which aptly illustrates the strong tradition of old time music in New York also, in its descriptions of that tradition, shows strong

1 Martin, 95-101.

2 Martin, 103-105; Leary, 56.

3 OMFA 1986, 122.

4 Simon J. Bronner, *Old Time Music Makers of New York State* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 53-63.

relationship to aspects of the Michigan and greater Great Lakes traditions. Of course, New York should be considered a Great Lakes state.

The Saline Fiddlers, from Saline Michigan, are a prime example of a successful school-system based fiddle group. Centered in Saline, the homeplace of Michigan fiddler Helen Gross, the Saline Fiddlers perform fairly actively and boast a number of CDs for sale. These recordings exemplify most of the current state of Michigan fiddling. They offer a wide range of tunes from a number of traditions. Their album "On My Way Home" has an album cover sporting a picture of a mountain – and not one of the Porcupine Mountains of the northwestern U.P. It is certainly a connection to the mountain-oriented perceptions of fiddling. What's more, the performance costume, or uniform, of the Saline Fiddlers includes black cowboy hats worn by all.⁵ It is difficult to determine just how much of a relation, if any, the Saline fiddlers have to the traditions of Helen Gross or the rest of Michigan prior to the significant modernization of external folk music influences in the state.⁶

This is a remarkable contrast to the performing groups in Appalachia, where it is pretty safe to say that the region's home fare, Southern and Appalachia Old-Time, with possibly a small dose of western swing or Cajun, will be found. Why then do today's old-time Appalachian fiddlers play Appalachian style music while in the rest of the country they play, in many cases, a good deal of Appalachian style music. Why do the Saline fiddlers draw their repertoire and self-representation from the South and the West, or from Celtic influences – according to their website, "from the traditions of American folk fiddle, bluegrass, jazz, western swing and Celtic music."⁷ I suspect the reason is the same that causes people to request me to play "Orange Blossom Special" or "Devil Went Down To Georgia," when they encounter me, a fiddler playing in watering holes in Michigan. I suspect it is the

5 All this information from their website; Saline Fiddlers, "Saline Fiddlers," <http://www.salinefiddlers.com> (accessed October 13, 2011).

6 It is worth noting that Michigan has always been a location experiencing outside influences. It would be tempting to term the 20th century as a time of upheaval, but that is itself a prejudiced statement. Michigan's traditions have always seen significant influences coming into the folk stream. Nevertheless, the 20th century does seem qualitatively different in terms of the nature of its change.

7 Saline Fiddlers, "About the Fiddlers," <http://www.salinefiddlers.com/sfp/about/> (accessed October 13, 2011).

same reason that most people seem to associate the fiddle with the South and the mountains. There is a long standing concept floating around that Appalachia is unique when it comes to folkways – that is, it actually has them

Appalachian Regional Scholarship

The history of the creation of the myth of Appalachia has been well argued in Appalachian regional scholarship, so only a brief outline of some of the main points of this argument will be mentioned below. Still, it will be helpful to bring some of the concepts of this regional scholarship into focus.

One early element of creating the concept of Appalachia as unique was the post-Civil War 19th century literary scene in America, particularly related to "local-color" writing.⁸ In *Appalachia on Our Mind*, Henry Shapiro writes of "the 1870s and 1880s," saying "during these decades only the most obviously or grossly 'interesting' subjects were acceptable to the editors . . ."⁹ He gives a fairly substantial list of such subjects, in the second half of which he includes "resort areas, primarily on the Atlantic Coast but on the Great Lakes and in the Appalachian Mountains as well, where readers might, or might aspire to spend a summer . . ."¹⁰ From this and the rest of Shapiro's list quoted partially above it can be seen that Appalachia's local "interesting" appeal was in company with other places all around the world and in the states. Shapiro says that those writers lacking "firsthand knowledge" of "exotic or picturesque places" ended up travelling "in search of local color"¹¹. He then proceeds to give the example of "Miss Constance Fenimore Woolson" as "a case in point."¹² Woolson's work, however, does not start in Appalachia; it began in Ohio and then moved to Mackinac Island, Michigan, "the first of a

8 Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 10.

9 *Ibid.*, 10.

10 *Ibid.*, 11.

11 *Ibid.*, 11.

12 *Ibid.*, 11.

series which John Dwight Kern calls her 'lake country writings'¹³. The list is substantial and resulted in a collection "published by J.R. Osgood as *Castle Nowhere: Lake Country Sketches*, in 1875"¹⁴.

Yet somewhere along the line, something different happened to Appalachia. It took on a unique spin, as seen below in Shapiro.

Unlike most of the areas described by the local colorists, Appalachia was not in fact separated from America by ethnic, geographic, or chronological distance. The mountaineers were native-born, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant. The mountain region was not only in America, but in that part of America which had been settled by the first generation of frontiersmen, hence where the rude conditions of the frontier ought long ago to have given way to the more sophisticated and "civilized" conditions of modern life.¹⁵

In this passage, Shapiro would seem to make the point that it was not necessarily that Appalachia was unique in terms of lifeways, but that a perspective at the time suggested that they should not have been unique. He also claims "that the sense of wonder which characterized the earliest sketches of Appalachia rapidly gave way before the assertions that the southern mountain region really was a strange land inhabited by a peculiar people"¹⁶. It may be worth noting that "the first generation of frontiersmen" was French in parts of the Great Lakes, and not exclusively Anglo in Appalachia. Yet this did not fit the American ethos. Shapiro goes on to say of "contemporaries" of this period, that "In writing about the southern mountains and mountaineers, and in dealing with Appalachia 'practically,' they developed patterns . . . which served in one way or another to integrate the perception of a reality of Appalachian otherness into dominant conceptions of the nature of American civilization"¹⁷.

The concept that the mountains were filled with Anglo-Saxons began to take special importance. This concept is derived from a few sources, but it is notably apparent in Rodger Cunningham's *Apples on the Flood*.

In the 1890s, again, with the closing of the frontier, there was mounting concern about America's ability to deal with the floodtide of immigration from Europe, and especially about immigration's predominantly Mediterranean, Slavic, and Jewish character. A great deal of soul-

13 Ibid., 12.

14 Ibid., 13.

15 Ibid., 17.

16 Ibid., 17-18.

17 Ibid., 31.

searching ensued concerning American identity and its relation to its European roots. In no time at all, a school of thought arose to contend that since the original 'frontier' culture of Americans was 'Anglo-Saxon,' and since Appalachians were quintessentially 'frontier' and 'American,' therefore Appalachians specially exemplified 'pure Anglo-Saxon' characteristics.¹⁸

This concept of Americanness had an influence on music; Shapiro writes of "folksong and folkdance" that ". . . a market for them was created by someone's observation that they were quintessentially American and hence 'interesting' . . ."¹⁹. Shapiro notes that Olive Dame Campbell was "interested in the definition of mountain life" and "suggest[ed] that the study of folksong might have 'sociological' as well as purely literary interest, that the mountaineers were best understood as a 'folk' misplaced in modern America."²⁰. And we can thank Olive Dame Campbell in large part for the famous Englishman, Cecil Sharp²¹, author of one of the collections to be looked at below. Such Anglo-Saxon-centric scholarship persisted in Malone's mind when he focused so strongly on the Anglo-Celtic traditions at the opening of his 1968 work. During the Appalachian Missionary Movement – a conflicted movement rooted in the history of perceptions of Appalachia – Appalachian folklife was marketed. Whisnant writes that,

At length the ballad collecting process turned out to be circular: Hindman (and more especially Pine Mountain) were predisposed by a variety of factors toward the older cultural survivals. That predisposition led them to prefer certain aspects of the total cultural system of the area. Their doing so brought them to the attention of scholars and collectors who were similarly disposed. By their activities and principles of selection, and particularly the publication and publicizing of their findings, the collectors reinforced the schools' preexisting cultural theories and judgments.²²

This argument by Whisnant states that the missionaries were involved in the process of collecting folklife and promoting it outside the region, though the "preexisting cultural theories and judgements" are complex enough to warrant significant analysis by Whisnant that won't be addressed here. But one thing is highly relevant, that "over and over again, the word went forth from the settlement schools that

18 Rodger Cunningham, *Apples on the Flood: The Southern Mountain Experience* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 112.

19 Shapiro, 284.

20 *Ibid.*, 249.

21 Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), XXV.

22 David E. Whisnant, *All That is Native & Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 56.

mountain culture was 'Elizabethan.'²³ Whisnant shows that from the outset, the early folk music collecting scene in the Appalachian region was tied to ethnocentrism and playing to the perceptions of cultural elites. Some early promotion of the music was outright racist and tied to Anglo-Saxon elitism, as can be seen in Whisnant's most striking example: the philosophical framework behind the White Top Folk Festival.²⁴

The scholarship of Appalachia showing the history of its importance to American elites under the auspices of "Anglo-Saxon" heritage has been well-documented in Appalachian regional scholarship and these concepts are familiar to those who have studied the history of the region's local and national perception. Nevertheless, to find this history applied beyond the bounds of Appalachia is rare, to say the least. It is a somewhat novel concept to consider that this very history has not only a significant impact on how the world views Appalachia and how Appalachia views itself, it is directly related to how the rest of North America views itself in terms of folklife. It is directly related to how Michiganders view fiddling – as an Appalachian or generally Southern phenomenon.

In his fascinating 1997 book, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, Richard A. Peterson traces essentially the same phenomenon within his broader look at concepts of authenticity and images of the old-timer, hillbilly, and cowboy. Peterson uses the phrase "regions of the mind" in association with the region of Appalachia.

The concept of Appalachia as pristine remnant of a bygone natural environment peopled by British American stock, unspoiled by the modernist thrust of urbanization and industrialization, was a self-serving contrivance of the latter third of the nineteenth century. Descriptions of the region were used either to highlight the improvements of civilization or to show its depravity in despoiling pristine nature; to identify its residents as noble relics of Elizabethan England or debauched by contact with the wrong outside influences; and also to conceptually clear the region of all its other residents, including Native Americans, African-American slaves, central European immigrants, and well-to-do urban vacationers.²⁵

While it might be an easy knee-jerk reaction to suggest that this conceptual framework, rooted in the

23 Ibid., 57.

24 Ibid., 183-252.

25 Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 215.

nineteenth century, was outmoded at the time of recording industry interest in Appalachia and the increasing marketing of early Country Music, the sweeping biases and historical interpretations espoused by scholars such as Malone and Wolfe in the 1960s and 1970s serve to represent the survival of the pervasive Appalachian myth.

James Leary's Contribution to the Discussion of American Folk Music

Though Peterson examines the idea briefly, little enough had been done to address the influence of Anglo ethnocentrism on folk music in a broader scope, but James Leary's 2006 book *Polkabilly: How the Goose Island Ramblers Redefined American Folk Music* did just that, and with considerable powers of scholarship. Leary's work is worth closer examination on these lines, and the next few pages will be dedicated to it.

Leary wrote, ". . . I am arguing that notions of American folklore, and by extension American folk music and song, have been constructed at particular historical moments by particular people for particular purposes."²⁶ Leary traces how early American folklorist William Wells Newell, "in the inaugural publication of the *Journal of American Folklore*" wrote "the beginnings of a powerful yet restrictive national vision of America's folklore—an intellectual and ideological manifesto that, particularly with regard to widely held notions of American folk music and song, prevails in the twenty-first century."²⁷ Newell was "the journal's editor and first president of the newly founded American Folklore Society."²⁸

Newell outlined a vision of American folklore that was decidedly ethnocentric, giving pride of place to Anglos, and further, "Newell associated Anglo-American folklore with youngsters, the working class, and dwellers in such hinterlands as the 'remote valleys of Virginia and Tennessee' and perhaps the wilds of Maine."²⁹ Newell also gives problematic descriptions of African- and Native-

26 Leary, 164.

27 Leary, 161.

28 Leary, 161.

29 Leary, 162.

American folklore in the United States. Leary includes a vivid paragraph of scholarship.

Newell's final inclusion of 'French Canada' and 'Mexico' looks beyond the United States to consider our non-Anglophone North American neighbors, without directly referring either to the presence of Franco-American people in Louisiana for more than a century or to the far lengthier, more numerous presence of Spanish-speaking peoples in America's Southwest. Other European Americans—whether recent immigrants or the abundant and musically influential long-time citizens of German heritage—received no direct mention at all, a telling oversight at a historical moment when New England had become more Catholic than Protestant, when particularly in urban areas—French Canadians, Irish, Italians, Portuguese, Slavs, Jews, and people of other nationalities and ethnicities outnumbered 'old stock' Americans. Although 'Old English Folk-Lore' merited seven vivid paragraphs of elaboration, other European Americans were granted a single terse sentence: 'The fourth department of labor named consists of fields too many and various to be here particularized, every one of which offers ample field to the investigator.'³⁰

Leary follows this hierarchy through the history of American social philosophy, the dominant WASP elites, the history of the Library of Congress and the careers of John and Alan Lomax.³¹ His look at Alan Lomax is particularly interesting, considering Alan Lomax's 1938 collecting trip to Michigan and Wisconsin. Leary quotes Lomax's glowing descriptions of the quantity of material to be collected in the U.P. Of Michigan. The collection represents an ethnic mix of informants as well as a number of languages.³² But Leary also traces the history of Lomax's subsequent neglect of the region, including how later, "while in Europe, Lomax developed a fierce disregard for the accordion, an instrument central to the Upper Midwest's characteristic sound."³³ Leary concludes his section on Lomax as follows:

Yet, were it not for the combination of historical forces, accident, and ideology, perhaps the subsequent work of Alan Lomax, the folk revival, and even our larger understanding of American folk music might have been quite different. Instead, despite having urged superiors, in a 1938 letter from Michigan's U.P., 'that I be sent back to the area next summer,' and despite having added extravagantly that it might be 'the most interesting country I have ever traveled in,' Alan Lomax never completed what he had imagined only a few months before as a 'rapid recording survey of folk music in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.'³⁴ Jim Leary traces the ethnocentrism of folk music scholarship and interest through the folk

30 Leary, 163.

31 Ibid., 163-184.

32 Ibid., 177.

33 Ibid., 180.

34 Ibid., 181.

revival to the present.³⁵ No cursory examination of Leary's work could argue his point as well as the case he lays out himself. In the end, Leary adds a weight of scholarship to the conclusion that, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries to the present, the folk history and practices of Finns, French Canadians, Germans, Métis, Slavs, Czechs, Scandinavians, Jews, and the Serbian and Romanian musicians whom Lomax recorded in 1938 – had not been and to this day are not considered the "right sort" to represent American folk music and folklife. The Irish, Scottish, and English among them might warrant more credit to the American Zeitgeist of the 19th, 20th, and yes, 21st centuries, and certainly these ethnicities are present. But the unique derivatives in the Upper Midwest were not held up alongside the supposed "quintessentially American" folklife that Roger Cunningham describes in relation to Appalachia. It apparently does not matter that the historical phenomenon are essentially the same, nor that Appalachia saw considerable German influence as well³⁶ Leary makes an astute observation concerning the lauded Appalachian (West Virginia) fiddler Clark Kessinger:

While the jigs, reels, minstrel tunes, and rags exemplifying the South's prevailing Anglo-African-American folk musical fusion predominate, more than a quarter of the Kessinger recordings—a schottische, 5 polkas, 5 marches, and 11 waltzes—hint broadly at non-Anglo-European influences. Indeed, two of the tunes, "Under the Double Eagle" (*Unter der Doppel Adler*) and "Lauterbach Waltz" (*Zum Lauterbach Hab Ich Mein Strumpf Gelorn*) are unarguably German.³⁷

Leary further describes Kessinger's own preference for waltzes and his recognized skill in waltzes and marches.³⁸ But such non-Anglo-African and even non Celtic influences of folk music do not make much of a ripple in conceptions of early Country music and American folk music. As just one of many examples of Midwestern influence, Leary writes that, "Recorded in 1935, Patsy Montana's best-known composition, 'I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart,' is what she called 'a nice polka tune,' and she attributed its initial success to the enthusiastic response of a 'lot of polka people in Michigan and

35 Ibid., 181-184.

36 This is a fact that even Roger Cunningham, who rests his thesis on the Celtic nature of Appalachia, does not deny; Roger Cunningham, *Apples on the Flood: the Southern Mountain Experience* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), xxviii.

37 Leary, 35.

38 Ibid., 25.

Wisconsin."³⁹

It is baffling how Malone could write that "such songs as 'Down By the Old Mill Stream' were the closest approximations of folk music that they knew"⁴⁰ or Wolfe could write that ""Hay began telling people that he was thinking of starting a program in Nashville like the National Barn Dance in Chicago; such a program would be more authentic in Nashville because it could draw on genuine folk performers from the nearby Tennessee hills."⁴¹ Considering a lively Polka and old time music scene on both radio and television,⁴² not to mention the mixed ethnic rural music traditions of the Midwest, it is not like the existence of folk music in the region was hiding under a bushel basket.

One of the thoughts that arises in response to evidence like the above is – what should it be called? Is the fiddling and singing of the Upper Midwest properly called Polka? In a word, no. The traditions of the Upper Midwest, Michigan included, did and continue to represent an ethnic mix that includes repertoire from Yankee, Irish, Scottish, Métis, French, Anglo, German, Slavic – the list goes on. The tunes can be found alongside each other, and the musical styles have adapted.⁴³

Though Leary's work is astute, there is one significant item of concern in it. Leary attempts to resolve the "what to call it?" situation with a kind of hybridized term, namely, "Polkabilly." Though not the inventor of this term, he has in his work attempted to make the term stick. It was not a term previously in use. In some cases, like the particular situation of the band the Goose Island Ramblers which Leary examines, the term may be apt, but as a representative of the region, it is problematic.

It is clear why Leary espouses the term. In his zeal for Upper Midwestern music, he hoped the term would bring recognition. He writes: "distinctive regional styles of music, however enduring and pervasive, have sometimes escaped widespread recognition until christened with a succinct, compelling name (blues, jazz, salsa, zydeco, hillbilly, polka) and promoted by entrepreneurs, practitioners,

39 Leary, 34.

40 Malone, 69.

41 Wolfe, 58.

42 Leary, 6, 34,

43 This adaptation is a common theme, both historically in the example of the Metis and in scholarship such as Martin's and Leary's.

scholars, and other advocates."⁴⁴ Yet Leary also documents that the practitioners and folk musicians of Wisconsin themselves often called the music simply old time or old tyme.⁴⁵ In fact, he elucidates quite a compelling history of the term, writing "the Upper Midwestern musicians favoring a creolized, regional repertoire likewise found a common name for their collective genre: 'old time music.'"⁴⁶ Leary traces this term's origins to the 1920s in the Upper Midwestern usage of people in a variety of venues to refer to the music in question.⁴⁷ Though he firmly establishes the usage of the term "old time" as historically used by the region's old time musicians to refer to their music, Leary attempts to promote the term Polkabilly, anyway.

In Michigan, old-time is a term used to reference the more traditional fiddling still to be found in the state. A fiddler and accordionist like Art Cole, a former Lakes freighter engineer, has referred to his music as "ethnic" to indicate its Polish, German, or what-have-you origins. Sometimes the adjective "Michigan" is appended to differentiate it from other regional versions of old-time music.

While Leary's intent is admirable and understandable, in the end, it may function as a means of mainstream American, Southern, or Anglo-Celtic-o-ophile folks to discredit the music of the Upper Midwest as "authentic" old-time music. Historically, the music of the region, on both sides of the U.S.-Canadian border, has been referred to as old-time. It represents fundamentally the same historical phenomenon. What all of these styles of music essentially have in common is the following simple description: A region in North America became settled or influenced by immigrants or victims of the slave trade. These people had musical traditions. As is culturally human, these people brought musical traditions into their new environments. These traditions continued in North American communities, developing and being influenced, but also largely remaining a community-based source of entertainment and meaning. Because different areas of the country were influenced by different individuals, ethnic groups, and developmental processes, regional variations became evident in the

44 Leary, v.

45 Leary, 26-31.

46 Leary, 26-27.

47 Ibid., 26-27, 205.

music.

Further, the appendage "billy" as the suffix of the term "Polkabilly" seems to frame it within a Southern milieu. It both seems to play into a Southern norm and allows for itself to be easily discounted. Consequently, I still espouse the term old-time to refer to the music of my home region. However, I do find Polkabilly to be a practical term in some situations, such as a band like the Goose Island Ramblers who mix regional old-time Polka and Country music.

Malone Again: Fusions, Interest, and Counter Arguments

In *Don't Get Above Your Raisin's: Country Music and the Southern Working Class*, Malone acknowledged the presence of related folk music in the north. He also acknowledged that the recording industry largely ignored it.⁴⁸ Malone starts off by introducing sociological reasons for this phenomenon that could easily be seen as related to the above line of argument tracing Appalachian regional and folk music scholarship:

Southern rural musicians probably appealed to recording talent scouts, just as they had to Cecil Sharp and other collectors of folk music during the World War I era, because they came from a region of the United States that was perceived as both exotic and musical. Visions of archaic but musical mountaineers and lonesome, singing cowboys had already entered American popular culture by the time the first hillbilly recordings were made. Well before that time, African Americans had introduced other versions of southern music—the spirituals, ragtime, blues, and jazz—to an enraptured American public . . . Whether the music of the white South suited their musical tastes, once the recording and broadcasting industries actually sampled it, they found, often to their surprise, that a vast, local market was ready to buy it.⁴⁹

Unfortunately, this fairly evenhanded and impartial description of the "why" behind Southern marketing and Northern neglect in the industry is quickly replaced by typical bias:

Above all, they discovered that this music was both different and more interesting than the rural musical forms of the North. Not simply a quaint survival of an older society (as it seemed to be in New England, for example), southern rural music appealed because of its diversity and because it truly represented the organic evolution of the southern working class. Although insufficiently understood or recognized at the time, the fusion of African American and Anglo American elements also made the music distinctive and intriguing.⁵⁰

48 Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin's*, 15-16.

49 Ibid., 16.

50 Ibid., 16.

Rather than ask whether the concept of "interesting" is relative and subjective, Malone seems to accept it as a given. The South's music *is* more interesting to him, and it shows. But while the industry may have seen the music of New England as "a quaint survival of an older society," it is apparent that the music of New England, Michigan, Wisconsin, and the whole span of the North was a music experiencing dynamic and powerful fusions of its own – by generally unwanted immigrants and hegemonically un-useful natives. How much the industry was honestly interested in the Southern working class is questionable, though Malone cites this alongside the "diversity" of Southern music. But given the working-class nature of Northern folk traditions and its incredible diversity, for Malone to use this argument and further write off other traditions as uninteresting is an exercise in significant bias. But Malone obviously espoused a new angle to maintain the traditional bias in the face of scholarship revealing the presence of folk traditions elsewhere.

Malone believed that the African influence,

. . . probably gave the music of the southern string bands the vitality and rhythmic punch that set them apart from other rural bands in America. Southern rural music *was* different from other styles, and the predominance of southern-born musicians on phonograph records and radio stations during these formative years created a pattern and precedent that have permanently shaped both the reality and the perception of country music.⁵¹

Here is another example of biased description. After all, the words "vitality and punch" can as easily be associated with the lively accordion playing of a Norwegian immigrant, of the fiddling of a Native American (how much fusion is desired?), and as someone who has witnessed firsthand the traditional polka dancing of Finns in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, I can attest to the vitality and punch of both music and motion. These qualities are not lacking in the French Canadian traditions. The French Canadians have long been known for their *joie de vivre*. Is it any more likely that the fusion of these cultures produced creole traditions of any less interest? No doubt "Southern rural music *was* different from other styles," yet this difference is not an issue of quality, of superiority and inferiority as

51 Ibid., 16.

Malone espouses, of a vitality and punch vs. a lack of vitality and punch. The issue should not be one of personal taste and bias, but these seem to be the foundation of the arguments often presented on the topic. Such half-truths, laden with historical fact but faulty interpretation, are some of the most dangerous kinds of scholarship.

There are a few lines of counter arguments worth addressing. The most viable of them on the surface is the consideration that the folk music of the Upper Midwest does not represent an old enough tradition to be considered truly American folk music. This line of argument may suggest that Appalachia was settled at an earlier period and therefore has had more time to become truly American. The immigrants to Michigan were later arrivals. This argument at first may appear viable but for a few problems. The first is that French influence in the Great Lakes region begins at an early date. Métis and French culture has significant roots in the area. Further, much immigration to Michigan early on originated with those already considered American, like New England Yankees bringing with them Yankee folkways from a region possessing its own fiddling traditions.⁵² It is true that the Great Lakes or the Upper Midwest region has experienced significant immigration since that time, but thanks in part to the coal fields of Appalachia, so did the Mountain South; Ronald Eller writes in *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*, that ". . . the ethnic composition of the mountains began to change again at the turn of the twentieth century, almost as drastically as it had at the turn of the nineteenth," due to "thousands of southern blacks and European immigrants."⁵³ Traditions in America do not crystallize but instead experience change, influence, and adaptation. Eller comments further that non-native immigrants to Appalachia were "most noticeable in the newer coal districts of eastern Kentucky, the Logan and Winding Gulf fields of southern West Virginia, and the Clinchfield area of southwest Virginia."⁵⁴ Eller further describes that their presence

52 See Bronner's work about Upstate New York, for instance.

53 Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*, (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 168.

54 Eller, 172.

was significant and encouraged by the coal industry.⁵⁵ He writes that "the largest ethnic group to immigrate to the mountains were the Italians, although large numbers of Poles, Hungarians, and Slavs arrived as well."⁵⁶ This should sound familiar; it represents an ethnic mix remarkably similar to Michigan's immigration. So far as numbers, Eller writes that "At the end of that decade [1900-1910], there were 7,600 Italian miners in West Virginia alone."⁵⁷ Many of these miners probably had families, further swelling the numbers of the immigrant communities. Though Eller also traces the departure from Appalachia of many people from these groups, he also affirms their continued presence.⁵⁸ But even without considering Appalachia, new influences on a present tradition with old roots can hardly be argued to be un-American, and today, Michigan old-time, preserves a range of dance tunes from schottisches to jigs and from waltzes to polkas. It is also inaccurate to suggest that the folk traditions of immigrants who arrived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were *new* anymore than those carried by the expatriate Southerners who arrived to work in Detroit.

Some may try to call the folklife and folk music of the Upper Midwest or Great Lakes "ethnic" music. However, this implies an Anglo-Celtic norm. To discredit a certain tradition of music or a certain region's tradition as ethnic is to suggest that all things are relative to a particular ethnic elite. This is seen in race politics in the United States, where a common concept exists that "white" people often see themselves as without ethnicity or race. To call the Upper Midwest or Great Lakes region's music "immigrant" music is also to define America in relation to a particular ethnic elite immigrant group, ignoring the historical phenomenon itself. Further, roots in Canadian, Yankee, French, and Native American cultures are no more "immigrant" than Germano-Anglo-Celtic-Cherokee-African Appalachian culture.

If country music scholarship is not ethnocentric, it is then suffering from an embarrassing and unfortunate dose of provincialism. In all likelihood, both could be true to a point. Similarly, it is easy

55 Ibid., 172-173.

56 Ibid., 174.

57 Ibid., 174.

58 Ibid., 174-175.

for Appalachian and Southern scholars to want to dispel negative stereotypes, but it is conversely hard to want to dispel the positive ones, especially when they are half-truths. Appalachia *was* rich in folklife. So was everywhere else. Appalachia just became known for the "right" stuff.

The referencing of America's old-time traditions as Anglo or Anglo-Celtic is common in old-time literature. A disturbing line of argument may go thus: "Well, using the term Anglo or Anglo-Celtic exclusively to mean English-speaking is simply shorthand." It is worth questioning in response why African-American traditions are still differentiated if that is the case. "In the end," someone might say, "it doesn't make much of a difference and isn't that big of a deal." Yet the use of the term Anglo or Anglo-Celtic exclusively is not simply short-hand, it is an inaccurate, misleading, and ideologically charged misrepresentation of American folk traditions and old-time music. As such, it is unacceptable for scholars and practitioners of old-time music – a music forming the basis of Country Music in the United States – to espouse this term as has been largely the case in old-time music dialogue to this day. As Leary's example of Clark Kessinger's repertoire illustrates, there is significantly more worth mentioning even in the Upland South.

And perhaps the most disturbing argument that might be encountered is the following: "Okay, okay, so people fiddled and sang and danced elsewhere. Still, the South and Appalachia represented a greater concentration and stronger tradition, and that's why everyone knows about it." Hopefully, my argument thus far will serve to erode this line of thought. But if there are still vestiges even after all the above and after an examination of the works cited herein as studies of Midwestern and Northern traditions, then a comparative case might be worth making. But it is unacceptable to cite the sheer neglect and lack of awareness of other regions as evidence that they had a weaker tradition. After all, this neglect and lack of awareness is often founded on outright error. That the South and Appalachia have seen more attention is obvious, but unfortunately it would be a fallacy to use that unbalanced attention as a discrediting factor to other regions. I would be interested to see how Selmer Halvorsen's list of 87 fiddlers or Stewart Carmichael's 94 dances fiddled in a summer can be considered an area of

weaker tradition.