

With Fiddle and Well-Rosined Bow: A History of Old-time Fiddling in Alabama. By Joyce H. Cauthen. (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1989, 282.p. ISBN 0-8173-1066-5 pbk.)

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With an extensive background working with numerous state folklife and arts councils to “celebrate and preserve the old-time musical tradition” of Alabama, Joyce H. Cauthen brings both wide-ranging experience and passion to this documentation of fiddling in Alabama. She divided the state into quadrants and interviewed 60 fiddlers, family members, and friends, in each, thus ensuring some coverage of various regions of Alabama. Research in local, as well as state archives, libraries, courthouses, and newspaper offices complements the interviews. These two main sources of information, vivid first-person remembrances and contemporary newspaper or journal/letter accounts of events, provide multifaceted perspectives, in which contradictions are not erased. Cauthen describes these contradictions as “small flaws in a fabric woven of memories and written accounts of earlier days. The pattern that emerges in the weaving... is vivid and true” (xi).

Photographs, both originals and restored, provided by the author’s friend, Kim McRae Appel, provide important visual information: the holding of instruments, clothes worn by musicians for certain occasions, interactions in social dance, hierarchies in groups, etc. Other images, such as copies of newspaper advertisements and posters, allow the reader access to a selection of the documents Cauthen had at her disposal. I consulted often the included map of Alabama, divided into counties and showing county capitals, to place some of the events that Cauthen describes. I found her case for the importance of physical boundaries, mountain ranges, rivers, and valleys, in the development of a variety of fiddle styles within the state so compelling that I wish a physical map had also been included.

Divided into five chapters, with two appendices, the book describes contexts and individuals important to fiddling from the settlement of Alabama until the end of World War II. In Chapter One, *The Fiddle in Alabama History*, Cauthen describes the settlement of Alabama in general, with the accompanying influx and amalgamation of different

fiddle styles, and early contexts for fiddling. She briefly discusses the fiddling of African-American slaves, but contends that by 1930, the practice had become largely a white institution; few of her informants could remember hearing or knowing any African-American fiddlers. Nonetheless, she attributes such changes in practice as the evolution of British reels into southern hoedowns to the influence of African-American fiddlers. She describes the early dissemination of tunes and style by travelling minstrels and soldiers in the civil war as precursors to modern tools of communication (recordings, radio, television, etc.). Post-WWII information is sketchy, since this is not her focus; she points out some of the influences on fiddling that need to be further developed: rock 'n roll, bluegrass, and patterns of decline and revival.

Chapter Two, *Modest Masters of Fiddle and Bow*, deals with processes of transmission and the development of individual style. Evidently the fiddlers whom Cauthen interviewed felt very strongly about the superiority of learning by ear versus learning by note; for example, Bob Kyle comments, “[A fiddler] can set himself back by taking violin lessons and learning how to read the notes...” (77). The chapter concludes with an extended narrative from an interview with fiddler, Everis Campbell, providing rich details in a first person account of fiddling through most of the 20th century.

Alabama's *Brag Fiddlers*, Chapter Three, is a series of short biographies with pictures, of seven fiddlers influential to fiddling in Alabama. Cauthen describes how they learned, their repertoire, where they played, who helped and encouraged them, how they felt about competing and recording, etc. Direct quotes from the fiddlers themselves, and colourful anecdotes of their lives, bring these men to life and make them human: they too felt nervous before a competition; they too wanted to win.

Chapter Four, *Fiddling the Buttons off their Sleeves*, focuses in detail on social contexts: housewarmings, square dances, contests and conventions. The inclusion of contemporary written descriptions from memoirs, journals, and newspaper articles provides vibrant details of these events: audience reception, prizes, distances travelled, sponsors, personalities, how they felt about competing, playing for dances, participating in the changing importance of old-time fiddling.

The final chapter, *Fiddling and Associated Sins*, explores the common image of the devil as a fiddler, and the basis for stereotypes of

the fiddler as a drunken, rowdy rabblouser. These images are particularly enduring in southern culture because of the strong rejection of worldly pursuits, dancing and fiddling, by many southern religions.

Appendix One is a list of old-time fiddle tunes, culled from contemporary newspaper articles and books, commonly played in Alabama before the growth of the recording industry. Emphasizing the influence of contests, Appendix Two lists the winners of conventions as reported in Alabama newspapers. Organized by county, Cauthen provides the place, date, and some basic information about the contests, as well as her sources of information.

The strength of this book is its extensive and careful documentation, from multiple perspectives, of old-time fiddling in one bounded space. Without justifying the use of this particular political boundary, Cauthen demonstrates the need for its flexibility by discussing events outside the state (particularly close by, in Georgia and Florida) that were important for fiddlers from Alabama. She states early in the book that there were many women fiddlers (44), but does not problematize the fact that none of them are included in the chapter on brag fiddlers, and there are significantly fewer stories and pictures of women fiddlers included in the book. Furthermore, she uses throughout the masculine pronoun “he” to replace “the fiddler”, perhaps the most telling commentary on the perceived (un)importance of the stories of women fiddlers to the history of Alabama fiddling. Nor does she explore other contentious issues, such as the sponsoring of many fiddle conventions by the KKK (and its concomitant influence on fiddling and race within the area). For an exploration of these and other issues, and detailed musical analysis to support discussions of musical style, we will have to wait for another book. In the meantime, this is an admirable beginning to an understanding of the development and role of fiddling in Alabama.

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