

FIDEL MARTIN: NORTHERN NEW HAMPSHIRE FIDDLER

“That’s a Hot One!”

Transcriptions of Art Rosenbaum’s Field Recordings from 1966 & 1967

INTRODUCTION:

I have regularly visited northern New Hampshire for decades, revisiting places where I was raised and my extended family roots. I have been quite interested in the traditional music of the region, in part as my first fiddle, my great-grandfather’s instrument, was given to me when I expressed an interest in it. My great-uncle played that fiddle for dances, and my grandmother “chorded” the piano in accompaniment for kitchen junkets in Lancaster. I still play the instrument today, keeping it as my “crosstuned” (scordatura) fiddle, although truth is that it’s a rather ordinary factory-made Stainer copy, purchased off a wire in a general store in Quebec’s Eastern Townships when the 20th century was still in single digits. I remember the Berlin of the later century well, notably for the noxiousness of the pulp mills, but also for the rich variety of its ethnic neighborhoods and its central role in shaping the north woods. Berlin was not the recreational New Hampshire of the adjacent White Mountains I also loved, but rather the blue-collar workplace of the north. I had heard of the Berlin’s Riendeau family and owned their 1970 LP “Old Time Fiddling from New England”, but when researching fiddle tunes on the Leger family’s Acadianmuisc.com site, I was surprised to learn that there was another fiddler in the same city, contemporary with the Riendeau’s--Fidel Martin. Intrigued, I followed the links posted on the Legers’ site and was pleased to find an archive of an hour and a half of Martin’s solo fiddle music, recorded in the mid-1960’s by folklorist, musician and painter Art Rosenbaum.

FIDEL MARTIN (1891-1976) was born central-eastern New Brunswick town of Rogersville in the Miramichi valley, now part of the village of Nouvelle-Arcadie, due south of the municipality of Miramichi. The area was settled by the French in the eighteenth century, although was ceded part of British Nova Scotia with the Treaty of Paris in 1763. Irish immigration to the region occurred in the first decades of the 19th century, intensifying during the mid-century Great Famine years when opportunity in the lumber and ship-building industries attracted skilled and unskilled labor. By the 1870’s the Irish were well-established in the Miramichi region and had grown to approximately 40% of the population, 80% of whom were Catholic. To this day, the community of Chatham (also part of municipal Mirimachi) calls itself the Irish Capital of Canada. Nearby Rogersville was named for a Roman Catholic bishop of Chatham. Although today 90% of the village population are French speakers, ‘Irishness’ has remained a regional cultural backdrop that undoubtedly influenced the Martin family.

Fidel was the one of the older children of Calixte “Calliste” and Emilienne Chavarie Martin (1869-1950)¹. He learned to fiddle at the age of 12, growing up in a musical household where his father, siblings, extended family and neighbors all played musical instruments,

¹ At least three siblings, Joseph, Genevieve “Jane”, and Norbert, survived to adulthood. In addition, a baby, Marie Victoire, died in her first year, and a brother Andre (1893-1918) was presumably killed in World War 1.

including fiddles, piano and accordion. He was self-taught and absorbed his skills from his musical household. Fidel recalled that there was playing and dancing at his house almost daily, noting it was “old style” square dancing where the figures of the popular dances were well-known to the dancers who performed them without the aid of a caller or prompter, as was the style in much of Canada.

In 1912, at the age of 20, and like many New Brunswick youth, Fidel sought work in the woods trades, finding employment in lumber camps near Island Falls, Maine, not far from the border with New Brunswick. It was tough, physically demanding work, and after some time he found suitable employment in a mill owned by the Great Northern Paper Company of Millinocket, Maine. At age 26, he moved to Berlin, New Hampshire, where he went to work for the Brown Paper Company, a pulp and papermaking mill and the largest employer in ‘the city that trees built’.

A year after his move to Berlin, the United States declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary and Fidel enlisted in the United States Army. He served overseas and, on his return, in the United States performing garrison duty². Fidel was proud of his service and was one of the founding members of Berlin’s Veterans of Foreign Wars post.

After his enlistment ended Fidel returned to work for the Brown Paper Company until 1930, when the depression took a toll and businesses struggled³. However, he managed to secure a public works job and was employed as a truck driver for the Berlin Public Works Department, joining Local 1444, the Berlin City Employees Union (AFSCME). It was a job he held for over twenty-five years until he retired in 1956. The Depression also took a toll musically: in 1966 Fidel recalled there were fiddle contests in the Berlin area in the 1920’s, but the bleak economy and changing musical tastes curtailed public performing. Martin wistfully pointed out, “We don’t have them anymore.” He had other interests besides music, however, and founded the White Mountain Beagle Club.

Fidel married Marie Louise Morneau, who predeceased him in July of 1956, and who, like her husband, was a member of St. Anne Parish in Berlin. Fidel himself died in Colebrook, New Hampshire, twenty years later⁴. He was survived by four sons and three daughters (all of whom lived in New Hampshire), and by extended family in New Brunswick, Ontario, and Quebec.

In 1966, 28-year-old painter, folklorist and collector Art Rosenbaum (1938-2022) was making some casual inquiries, “shotgun collecting” as he called it--showing up somewhere and asking around for people who play old music--in a working-class neighborhood in

² He told a story to Art Rosenbaum of being on guard duty in 1919 and receiving orders to “let no one pass.” A certain Colonel House attempted to pull rank and bully his way past, but Fidel stuck to his orders and arrested the officer.

³ The Brown Paper Company limped on until 1935, when they filed for bankruptcy and the Brown family lost ownership. The Brown Paper Company limped on until 1935, when they filed for bankruptcy and the Brown family lost ownership.

⁴ Fidel and Marie are not buried together: she in Berlin, he in Colebrook.

Berlin, where many people of French-Canadian origin were living and working in the mills and the trades that services them. He was pointed to the Riendeau family and to Fidel Martin, as the premier 'folk' musicians in the city, who, like most, were happy to share their music. "I just wanted to meet people and learn to play directly from them, because the music excited me more than the kind of music that was commercially available," Rosenbaum told interviewer Keith Goetzman in 2009. "So it became an adventure to go out and meet these folks, and the recording was just part of the encounter. Most people were anxious to share their music, even with a stranger." Martin fit this description, and was remembered by Rosenbaum as a friendly individual who seemed to enjoy getting out his fiddle and being recorded by interested strangers.

Art's collector's interest was rewarded with tapes of Fidel's fiddling from two different dates in August, 1966, totaling about an hour of recorded music. Art was impressed enough with the musician that he returned the next year and recorded an additional 30 minutes of music from Fidel, along with several cuts from Fidel's neighbors, Louis and Larry Riendeau.

While Fidel never recorded commercially, a few of his pieces from Art's field work were issued on CD. "Cup of Faith/Beaudoin Quadrille" can be heard on the Rosenbaum anthology "The Art of Field Recording vol. 1" (Dust-to-Digital Records, 2007), as can "La Grondeuse" of "The Art of Field Recording vol. 2" (Dust-to-Digital Records, 2009). According to Rosenbaum, Martin would exclaim at the end of a spirited take: "Jesus Christ, that was a hot one!" unfortunately not captured on the field recordings.

THE MUSIC:

It is difficult to categorize Fidel Martin's music. Much of his repertoire, as reflected in the field recordings, is essentially New England traditional fiddling. His renditions of "Money Musk," "McCloud's Reel," "Flowers of Edinburgh," "Garryowen," and several other pieces are core New England fiddle repertory of the first half of the 20th century, well-known to regional New Hampshire fiddlers. Less well known, perhaps, but by no means rare would be the pieces learned from the recordings of Canadian 'Down-East' radio and TV fiddler Don Messer, and the Irish fiddle masters, represented by his rather reverential references to fiddler "Mike" Coleman (the prolific and renowned County Sligo recording artist of the 1920's-1940's) and the Irish tunes in his repertoire. There are a few pieces that directly tie him to the musical community of his early life in New Brunswick: "Chatham Reel" and "Bededine Quadrille" are prime examples. More telling, in terms of his musical roots, is his accompaniment to his fiddling with his rhythmic foot-tapping, or *podorhythmie*, a characteristic practice among Québécois and Acadian musicians in which the feet produce a repeated percussive pattern. The practice has not been widespread in New England fiddling (although not unknown).

According to Rosenbaum, Fidel did not often recall the names of the tunes he played. He often struggles on the tapes to remember them when Art invariably asked for the title, and is pleased when he can recall a name. Instead, like many fiddler's who recall the music perfectly but stumble on the name of the piece, he called several by the name of the fiddler

he learned the tune from, or associated it with. Thus we have “Tom Doucette,” “Tom Carpenter,” “Jerry Babineau,” “Joe Woulet” and others as tune names⁵. Many fiddlers who learn by ear have similar responses when asked to recall tune names on the spot; the music is firmly recalled, but the associated title is not. Fiddlers who read music and learn tunes from printed music often have the opposite problem. The title is recalled, but sometimes the associated music is not immediately remembered. Two pathways are at play, aural memory and visual memory, and Fidel Martin was an aural learner who may have been musically illiterate, but who nonetheless had a well-developed aural memory for tunes that allowed for more flexibility for spontaneous variety.

A characteristic of many solo fiddlers across genres is idiosyncratic playing elements, of which Fidel has a few. He has a penchant for ‘dwell’ notes at some of his cadences. ‘dwell notes’ according to vernacular researcher and musicologist Chris Goertzen, are notes that are held longer than usual, either for emphasis or for transition to a new phrase or part. Thus it was not unusual for Fidel to add an extra beat to the last measures of his parts. He does not invariably do so, but often enough to indicate this was entirely copasetic with his music making and not a random mistake. Conversely, Fidel also does the opposite: he truncates some cadential measures in both duple and triple time to half their usual beat length, e.g. playing a 2/4 cadence measure in a 4/4 tune, these may be posited as ‘vacate’ measures, the opposite of dwell, which Fidel sometimes plays at cadences when there are held notes and little melodic activity. These dwell/vacate measures are apart from ‘crooked’ tunes—pieces composed with rhythmically irregularly measured parts—that, like podorhythmie, are characteristic of many Québécois and Acadian dance tunes. Fidel plays a few tunes on the tapes that are traditionally considered ‘crooked’ (irregular), “Bededine Quadrille” being a primary example. A refreshing aspect of Fidel’s playing is his penchant for staccato or shortened quarter notes, where he also gives the note a little ‘push’ with his bow. The result is that the note sounds out and is definitive, and emphasizes the phrasing. It’s a dance musician’s detail that helps break up the monotony of the series of eighth notes and helps give ‘lift’ to the music.

Another aspect of his music is also associated with aural learners, and that is the ability to spontaneously adjust details of the music produced while still keeping to the original melodic and harmonic structure of the tune. Musical improvisation would be an example of this, but in traditional (non-bluegrass) fiddling, the melodic and rhythmic adjustments are more subtle and understated. Martin introduces these adjustments continually in his music, never playing a melodic phrase in exactly the same way, but varying it subtly. The result is a piece that has more interest, not only for the fiddler (who is in effect ‘playing catspaw’ with the music), but for the listener. It is this ability that imbues Fidel’s renditions of the old standards sound fresh and alive.

There are questions, however. How much of the recordings were Fidel’s spontaneous selection, and was there any direction or purposeful request from the field recorder? Were there old tunes from his early years in New Brunswick that were deliberately censored?

⁵ Title or no, he would play with enthusiasm and little hesitancy; after playing a vigorous tune he would exclaim, “Jesus Christ, that’s a hot one.”

What were his musical contacts (as indicated in the tunes identified by fiddler's names), and how did he interact with them? Unfortunately, after nearly sixty years Fidel's peers have passed, and no one now recalls his playing. He was not a musical celebrity; he was a competent and sometimes very interesting amateur musician, and we are fortunate to have a record of his music on sound recording.

THE TRANSCRIPTIONS:

Martin generally played through a tune two or three times, occasionally playing them only once through (particularly when it was well known, such as "Irish Washerwoman" or "Pop Goes the Weasel"). The transcriptions are generally of the second full repetition of the tune, although occasionally I have introduced a particularly interesting variation from one of his other repeats of the melody. Some of the transcriptions could be shortened with strain repeats and first and second endings, but instead were written out in one longer strain to be able to capture some of Fidel's variations. All transcriptions were made from the recordings from the Art Rosenbaum Collection deposited at the Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection of the University of Georgia. They may be accessed on-line at:

Tape 1 - (8/1/1966) <https://bmac.libs.uga.edu/Detail/objects/331630>

Tape 2 - (8/24/1966) <https://bmac.libs.uga.edu/Detail/objects/331506>

Tape 3 - (8/1967) <https://bmac.libs.uga.edu/Detail/objects/331538>

LOUIS RIENDEAU: Rosenbaum's Tape 3, from August, 1967, included several tunes from Louis Riendeau (fiddle) and his son Larry (guitar) following Fidel Martin's pieces to the tape, and, even though I have focused on Fidel, it seemed appropriate to include all of Art's 1967 field recordings in this booklet. Louis Riendeau (1900-1985) was the patriarch of a musical family of Berlin who, like Martin, have Acadian roots in the Canadian Maritimes. His son, Henri Louis Riendeau (1928-2016) was a Berlin native and self-taught musician as was his older brother Laurier (Larry) (1926-2015). The Riendeaus played their music in social clubs, kitchen breakdowns, hunting camps and other local settings. The Riendeau family may be heard on their LP "Old Time Fiddling from New England" (County Records 725), originally released in 1970, though now out of print.

Andrew Kuntz 7/2024, Wappingers Falls, NY

References:

- 1) <http://www.acadianfiddle.com/artists2/2021/fidel-martin>
- 2) <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/168679112/fidel-martin>
- 3) <https://www.utne.com/arts/rosenbaums-art-field-recording/>

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