

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

The King of Reels

When Manchester, England-born James Buckley's instrumental tutorial, *New Banjo Method*, came out in 1860, he and his three sons were at the height of their popularity. In the top tier of American minstrel troupes, they were popular and prosperous enough to have their own theater building on Broadway in New York, a home base from which to launch their six-month-long tours, a constant for minstrel shows. They had reached the pinnacle of fame in their genre, renowned throughout America and Great Britain. Visiting English novelist Charles Dickens went to the theater to see them around this time, and excitedly wrote:

"...went to the Buckley's last night. They do the most preposterous things, in the way of Violin Solos, Deeply Sentimental Songs, and Lucrezia Borgia music, sung by a majestic female in black velvet and jewels with a blackened face! All that part of it, is intolerably bad. But [some] things are very good; and there is one man – the tambourine – who attempts to do things with chairs, in remembrance of an acrobat he has seen, which is the most genuinely ludicrous thing of its kind, I ever beheld."

Buckley's book contained "a very choice collection of popular songs and ballads, plantation songs, jigs, reels, walk-arounds, hornpipes, polkas, waltzes, &c.," as well as instructions on playing the banjo; however, his publisher made sure to note prominently that "many of the jigs, reels and other dances in this book can be played upon the violin" so as not to limit sales to one instrument. Importantly, Buckley was one of the first to use European-style notation to attempt to capture the uniqueness of African-American banjo tunes, and he was largely successful in his efforts.

Amongst the various "jigs, reels and other dances" in the volume, one finds "King of all Reels," a title meant to convey a preeminence over other reels, an undisputed pinnacle of the binary form. Someone must

have thought it so, to give it such a bold title; but such an assertion is rather like sticking one's chin out and daring a blow. Notwithstanding that there are any number of subjective factors in identifying superior tunes (i.e. "taste"), one objective factor (of many) is the longevity of a particular tune – whether or not it stands the test of time. King for a day is but a slight monarch, hardly worth the footnote, but a reign of depth and longevity is a marvel.

The preponderance of reels are binary creatures, made of two parts, and in the happiest cases each strain musically complements the other, generally one strain higher and one lower, but fitting together well so that interest is maintained throughout. Carrying the royal analogy a bit further, we have, in the best of the form, a perfect monarchical union – a king and a queen; robust, complementary, and equally strong/pleasing. Like all couples, they can either remain a union or they can go their separate ways over time, perhaps lured away by the enticement of another, fresher strain, with which they will then "take a turn on the dance floor." And, just that easily, our minstrel-era "King of all Reels" has been diminished, for the tune's lasting mark on the tradition is in one strain only, which shows up in a number of genres in several different traditions, and, more importantly, with an astonishing retention of "royal" musical DNA.

The first aspect of Buckley's reel to be jettisoned over time was not the second strain of the tune – that comes later – it was the title. In fact, the union of both parts of "King of all Reels" remained strong for decades – it was just not called by the "kingly" appellation anymore. The music survived relatively intact with the new name "Lardner's Reel" – an ironically mundane name for a tune that once had pretensions of preeminence; nevertheless, it was the one that managed to survive for quite some time. The music for "Lardner's Reel" – not identical but very close to "King of all Reels" (the second strain shows more divergence than the first) – was included by Boston music publisher Elias Howe in several of his publications, the first only five years after its minstrel debut, although all with Buckley's minstrel banjo syncopation filled in. "Lardner's" can be found in Howe's *Musician's Omnibus*, vol. 1 (1865) and his compendium *Quadruple Musician's Omnibus* (1869), and, finally in William Bradbury Ryan's *Ryan's Mammoth Collection* (published by the Howe firm in 1883). There's evidence that the new title for the tune came from the name of

King of all Reels

The image displays the musical notation for the first strain of the fiddle tune "King of all Reels". It is written on a single treble clef staff in the key of D major (indicated by two sharps: F# and C#) and in 2/4 time. The notation consists of four lines of music, with measure numbers 1, 5, 9, and 14 marked at the beginning of each line. The melody is characterized by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, creating a rhythmic and melodic pattern typical of a reel. The first line starts with a quarter rest followed by a quarter note G4, then a series of eighth notes. The second line continues the pattern with a quarter rest and a quarter note G4. The third line begins with a quarter rest, a quarter note G4, and a triplet of eighth notes (A4, B4, C5). The fourth line concludes the strain with a quarter rest and a quarter note G4, ending with a double bar line.

a dance. An earlier Howe publication, grandly titled *American dancing master, and ball-room prompter containing about five hundred dances including all the latest and most fashionable ... with elegant illustrations, and full explanation and every variety of the latest and most approved figures, and calls for the different changes, and rules on deportment and the toilet, and the etiquette of dancing*, published in 1862, included the dance “Lardner’s Reel” (First couple forward and back, cross over in front of the opposite, join hands and down the centre, all four in a line, and back; ladies chain, forward and back four, leading couple cross over to places casting off one couple). There was no music printed in the *American Dancing Master*, but the dance was directed to be set to “Reynolds Hornpipe.” Unfortunately, I can find no trace of a hornpipe by that name, nor do we know who Reynolds was nor how the dance came to be, although it’s easy enough to speculate he/she was a dancing master or New England dance choreographer.

Probably what happened, as it did so often, was that “King of all Reels” was a more attractive tune than was “Reynolds Hornpipe” for the dance, and the music took on the name of the dance by association with it. Hence “King of all Reels” became “Lardner’s Reel.” The Howe publications, bibles for the musically literate fiddler, assured that “Lardner’s Reel,” music and title, enjoyed a measure of stable longevity in North America. It can be found in the later publications of Harding (1928), Robbins (1933), M.M. Cole (1940, basically a reprint of *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*), and Randy Miller and Jack Perron’s *New England Fiddler’s Repertoire* (1983).

“Lardner’s Reel” can also be found in 20th century tradition in Missouri. Cyril Stinnett, renowned proponent of the Missouri Valley style of fiddling, played it, and field researcher Vance Randolph collected the title in the 1940s from traditional musicians in the Ozarks. Irvin Yaugher, a southwestern Pennsylvania fiddler, played his version of “Lardner’s Reel” for collector Samuel Bayard, but when Bayard pointed out that Yaugher’s tune and Howe’s tune had little in common, Yaugher fell back on the old time fiddler’s equivocation that his was “the old-fashioned way of playing it.”

The first strain of the reel proved the stronger and took interesting pathways in the tradition, coquettishly dallying with a number of other strains for recombined reels. Researcher Samuel Bayard ana-

lyzed the reel and concluded, “while the first half ... occurs pretty frequently in our instrumental tradition, it seems to have no steadfast association with any one second strain.” It has been observed that Missouri fiddlers today often play the beginning of “Lardner’s Reel” and end on some other tune.

One such would be “Coming down from Denver,” one of modern fiddler Charlie Walden’s “100 essential Missouri fiddle tunes,” although it may have been called “Coming down from Boston” originally. Tracing variants gets somewhat more complicated considering “Coming down from Denver” itself developed diverging second strains. Missouri fiddling expert Howard Marshall detects two distinct second strains in current Missouri fiddling tradition, and points out that some fiddlers (like Cleo Persinger, Johnny Bruce, and Gene Goforth) played a third part!

Prize-winning northwest Missouri fiddler Cyril Stinnett (1912-1986) played both “Lardner’s Reel” and “Coming down from Denver.” Marshall notes that Stinnett played the tunes with virtually the same first part, “but the second (low) parts differ. His “Lardner’s Reel” is more like Byron Berline’s second part to Berline’s “Coming down from Denver.” It is anyone’s guess how these second parts evolved. Berline and Stinnett had known each other since the 1960s when they competed at contests, including the National Contest at Weiser, Idaho.”¹

Boone County fiddler Cleo Persinger (1909-1971), an exponent of the flowing Little Dixie style of playing that developed in central Missouri, called it “Coming down from Denver on a Trip to Galway Here and There,” deliberately conflating variant titles into one. Nashville studio session and side-band musician Tommy Jackson (1926-1979), adjudged one of the finest fiddlers to record in the 20th century, played a reel called “Here and There” (Dot Records 1233, 1955) which employs a close variant of “Lardner’s Reel’s” first strain, and is undoubtedly the one Persinger was referring to in his compound title. It was a favorite of Missouri African-American fiddler Bill Driver, who, while he played it often for dances, had no name for it. Collector Robert Christeson captured his version, however, and transcribed it in his *Old Time Fiddler’s Repertory*, vol. 1 (1973) where it can be found as “Bill Driver’s Breakdown in A”.

There are more second strain partners to take the dance floor with the

Coming down from Denver

“King/Lardner” first part. “Hopple’s Reel” was collected by Bayard in the 1930s in southwestern Pennsylvania, learned by his informant, Samuel Losch, from an older Juniata County fiddler named Christ Hopple who named it after him. Two tunes with western-sounding names, “The Cowboys” and “Prairie,” also are recombined “Lardner” tunes, although “Prairie,” from Harding’s *All-Round Collection* (1905), is set as a hornpipe and not as a reel. Another recombined example managed to retain the latter 19th century penchant for high rank, large size, and superlatives in their titles, in the spirit of “King of all Reels.” “Galaxy Reel” was another from a Howe publication, the *Diamond School for the Violin* (1861).

A tune played in northeastern Kentucky/southern Ohio, “Big Indian Hornpipe” is in the recombined category as well – this “king” wants to dance with as many partners as possible! It’s not considered an “indigenous” Kentucky tune, but rather one that crept into the repertory of regional fiddlers such as Jimmy Wheeler (1917-1987), who learned it from his father or Acey Neal, and Buddy Thomas (1935-1974), who had it from his mentor and playing partner, Morris Allen. The title, though, is borrowed. There is another, different “Big Indian Hornpipe” (fiddler Roger Cooper recalled a tune list from 1932 where the title is listed as “Big Engine Hornpipe,” a minor “mondegreen”) that was played by George Hawkins and Alfred Bailey in nearby Bath County, Kentucky, that has more claim to provenance as a “Kentucky tune.”

However, in the case of the Wheeler/Thomas “Big Indian Hornpipe,” the first strain of “Lardner’s” has not been adopted intact. Rather, musical DNA in the form of melodic motifs and patterns from “Lardner’s” has been altered and recombined. One can still recognize it as the source, but it is what is called a “distanced” piece from the original – like the end result of the original phrase whispered at the beginning of the old party game Telephone, transmitted through successive listener/repeaters; or, more to the point, similar to children and grandchildren carrying recognizable features and traits inherited from their parents. “Kansas City Reel,” recorded by Missouri’s Fiddlin’ Bob Larkin with his family for OKeh Records (45205) in 1928 is another good example of this kind of derivative material: the first few bars are clearly related to “Lardner’s” but the remainder is different material.

Versions of “King/Lardner” show up in other traditions as well. Both

of the original strains can be found, a bit altered, as a hornpipe called “The Halfway House” in Francis O’Neill’s *Music of Ireland* (1903). O’Neill does not give source credit for the tune, but it is one of his borrowings from *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*. O’Neill did not adapt the tune from Ryan’s “Lardner’s Reel” but rather from his “Turnpike Reel.” Tennessee fiddler Fletcher Bright (1931-2017) played the tune under that title. “Lardner’s” and “Turnpike” are nearly identical, although “Turnpike Reel” is the more musically awkward of the two. Halfway houses were rest stations on turnpikes where passengers could disembark for refreshments and horses changed out for a fresh pair, so we have not only related tunes, but related titles. Curiously, the tune also has gained currency among Irish players under the title “John Lardiner’s.” Perhaps a musician by this name did play the reel, but it’s also likely that his name and the name “Lardner’s Reel” become confounded; at any rate, the title “John Lardiner’s” is of no particular antiquity.

Québec harmonica player and Canadian country-and-western singer Jean-Ludger Foucault (1915-1989) used the melodic material in his “Reel de Valcourt,” named for a town in the Eastern Townships (near Sherbrooke) and recorded on his 1968 LP *La Chanson De L’Aveugle* (Carnaval C-519). It was revived in this century by the band Raz de Marée/Tidal Wave for a contra-dance favorite, set in the key of D. The prolific Montreal fiddler Joseph Allard (1873-1947) recorded a version in 1933 (Victor 263091a), similarly distanced, as “Reel tartes aux pommes” (Apple Pies Reel). As we have seen in other genres, both of these reels have different second strains, unrelated to one another or other “King/Lardner” variants.

The fact that close variants of a tune, or even of one strong strain of a tune, can coexist across traditions over more than a century and a half is an achievement indeed, and perhaps worthy of a “kingly” title. If “we live through our children” is true, than Buckley’s tune is mighty indeed.

¹ Howard Marshall, review: “Cyril Stinnett: Home Videos from the Dwight Lamb Collection,” *Old-Time Herald*, vol. 13, No. 11, Jan. 2015, p. 44.

[Andrew Kuntz maintains two on-line databases, *The Fiddler’s Companion* (ibiblio.org/fiddlers) and his current project *The Traditional Tune Archive* (tunearch.org). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in a variety of old time, Irish, and French-Canadian music sessions.]

The Halfway House