

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

Douglas's Favorite

One of the fascinating aspects of the study of tunes is their pattern of dissemination; some are widespread, even international, while some are strictly local. Others are “singularities”—composed tunes that do not survive their makers. What makes one survive and another perish, and how does a tune gain “currency” or use in larger fiddling repertoire? Rather than pure Darwinism (the best tune for the conditions is the winner), it seems often to be a combination of serendipitous events, including (but not limited to) its intrinsic musical worth, fashion, the reputation of the performer/composer, and musical accessibility (e.g. it cannot be too difficult to play for the average fiddler).

For a tune to be disseminated it also must reach an audience, even if that consists of one other fiddler who enjoys it enough to want to learn it. Thus isolation is anathema to a tune's survival. Isolation could take several forms: it may be geographical, when a fiddler-composer simply lives too remotely to find an audience; or a matter of personal choice, as when a fiddler declines to play for other than his/her own personal enjoyment, or restricts his/her audience as a result of performance anxiety. In some cases, tunes have historically failed to find an audience for geo-political reasons, as when war or conflict restricts the flow of commerce, ideas, and culture (although an argument can be made for war actually increasing cultural dissemination in some cases, as it exposes surviving musicians to influences they might not have otherwise been exposed to). Finally, there may be cultural reasons for lack of dissemination, as can be seen, for example, in the social restrictions imposed upon (or, often, self-imposed by) women composers in some regions and social classes where music-making and composition was considered improper behavior for their gender.

If an audience is needed for “currency,” then how does a tune spread? Nowadays, of course, there is a variety of powerful media to help dissemination of fiddle tunes, including perhaps the most dramatic dissemination innovation yet—YouTube—responsible for more imitative learning than ever before, and bringing “aural transmission” into the digital age. Indeed, so pervasive in modern times is the digital media in the dissemination of traditional fiddle tunes that one wonders if aural transmission exists anywhere in its former unadulterated context, that of being passed from fiddler to fiddler, often in a mentoring relationship. It is typical today for a student of fiddling to find direction from a variety of media sources, even should he/she have a primary tutor. Pre- the digital age, there were of course sound recordings, which allowed for an expanding audience and potentially wider dissemination. For centuries, there have also been printed media, which, while a poor vehicle for conveying style and nuance, at least gave the outline of tunes that could then be embedded in a personal or regional style for consumption by a local audience.

If this simplistic (and incredibly reductionary) paragraph suffices at all to partly explain the mechanism for dissemination, then we

are still left with “why” a tune is deemed worthy of learning by one or many fiddlers. If we have opportunity (i.e. an audience) to learn, a mechanism to learn (mentor, sound/video recording, book), then what makes a tune worthy of one's time to learn? The answer, of course, is different from individual to individual, and a matter of taste; if there is a quorum among fiddlers that a tune meets the requirements of taste, then it is likely to be learned and repeated. Taste is the most nebulous, most difficult to define criterion for dissemination; and tastes change, among individuals and cultures.

All this is leading up to why I think it's fascinating to ponder again, as we have in previous Tune History columns, the concept of “tune family,” which by definition includes a core melody and variants that have been created in the process of dissemination. In other words, the core tune has gained enough value to have “currency” in the historical record, and found a wide enough audience to have found traction in a musical arena outside its original local or regional boundary.

“Mountain Hornpipe” or “Douglas's Favorite Hornpipe” (Howe gives both titles: “Douglas's Favorite, or Mountain Hornpipe”) is not a particularly old tune, at least not by Tune History standards, and dates back probably no earlier than the mid-19th century. It is not dramatically widespread, either, being contained within North American boundaries, but chiefly in the United States. It is a good example of a tune that spread not by aural transmission, but rather primarily by printed media. Its appearance in the mid-19th century coincided with a rise in musical literacy (so that notation was being used by more and more people) and a concurrent technological breakthrough in the printing industry, which allowed cheap, mass-produced music books to become available in nearly every part of the settled world.

The earliest source for “Douglas's Favorite,” which is given variously as a hornpipe or reel, to have been found is in *Saunders' Complete Violin Instruction*, published in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1847 by music teacher George Saunders, who had a shop there. [I thank Seattle fiddler, recording entrepreneur (Voyager Records), and musicologist Vivian Williams, for bringing the publication to my attention.] We have no idea who “Douglas” was, or even if the name is a surname or given name, but perhaps George Saunders knew! It next appears in Boston publisher Elias Howe's *School for the Violin* (1851). Howe gave the title as “Douglas's Favorite, or Mountain Hornpipe,” inserting, for the first time, the “Mountain” title. It seems likely that Howe obtained the tune from the Saunders publication, as Howe was known to have been an aggressive collector, gleaning from a variety of sources that included personal acquaintance with fiddlers and other musicians, journeymen composers, and regional and international printed volumes. He certainly cast a wide regional net in New England for many decades.

The tune itself has some attractions that helped to increase its survivability, beginning with a pleasing octave leap in the first notes, repeated in the second, fifth, and sixth measures of the first strain; followed by a downward cascade through the tonic chord, satisfying to play and hear. Next, the tune employs musical motifs borrowed from other tunes that are familiar to many fiddlers: the third measure harkens to the weaving patterns of the “Leather

Breeches” family of melodies, while the fifth and sixth measures of the second strain are a rising repetitive note sequence that can also be found in “Bill Cheatum.” Finally, both strains are capped by a two-measure cadence that is a stock hornpipe motif, borrowed from British and Irish tradition (as found, for example, in “The Greencastle Hornpipe”). The combination works, by musical standards and by aesthetics—it is interesting, relatively easy to play (despite the string leap of the octave jump); familiar, but different enough not to be confused with other melodies.

Howe and/or his audience must have liked the combination, for it appears in an array of subsequent publications of the Howe firm—and later, the Howe archives—spanning nearly a century: Howe’s *School for the Violin* (1851) and *Diamond School for the Violin* (1861), *1,000 Jigs and Reels* (1867), *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection* (1883), *White’s Unique Collection* (1891), and *Coles’ 1000 Fiddle Tunes* (1940) all contain the tune, as probably do many of the myriad of the Howe publications. However, the hornpipe/reel also appears in publications outside the Howe empire. New York publisher Ed Harding (“Harding’s Music House”) included it in *Harding’s Original Collection* (1928) and *Harding Collection* (1915, No. 11). A note-for-note version with Howe’s is in Ira Ford’s *Traditional Music in America* (1940), and although Ford claimed to have had his tunes primarily from Midwest fiddlers, that does not equate with collecting in the field, and, despite his taking familiarities with the shortened title “Doug’s Hornpipe,” his version had obviously been book-learned.

While my main thesis is that the core tune was primarily spread through its appearance in the Howe publications, there is documented overlap with aural transmission. For example, “Mountain Hornpipe” was collected in the tradition by Samuel Bayard

from the playing of several southwestern Pennsylvania fiddlers; in fact, Bayard found it was a “quite well known dance air” among fiddlers in that region. He collected an untitled version, fairly close to the Howe notation, from fiddler David P. Gilpin of Connellsville, Pennsylvania, in 1943, who had learned it in Dunbar. Bayard also had it from William Shape, an elderly fiddler who lived in Waynesburg, Greene County (who called it after himself, “Shape’s Hornpipe”), and, in the 1930s, from fiddler Samuel Losch, who had learned it from a local mentor, Christ Hopple, and who called it “Hopple’s Tune.” It was also collected in tradition from the playing of the late Copen, Braxton County, West Virginia, fiddler and banjo player Melvin Wine (1909-2003), who called it “Old Skedaddelink” and who played it on the banjo (skedaddelink presumably is a variant of skedaddling, meaning “to run away hurriedly; to flee”). It has since become a core part of the clawhammer repertoire.

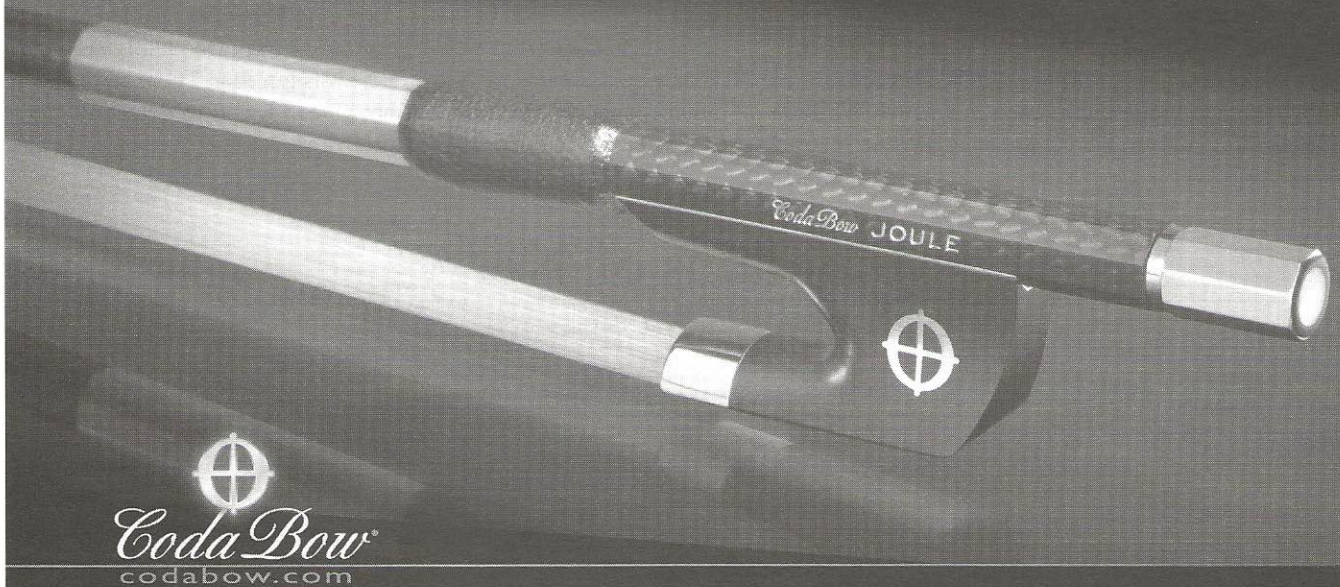
There are two versions of the tune family in Midwest fiddle repertory. “Ice on the Pumphandle” was collected by R.P. Christeson from the playing of Burt County, Nebraska, fiddler Uncle Bob Walter (d. 1960), in a variant that is different enough from printed versions to have either been learned from tradition, or stamped with Uncle Bob’s own stylistic changes. Walter (who spelled his name without the ‘s’ on the end that is often appended), had some classical training and was a regionally renowned fiddler as a result of his broadcasts on KMMJ in Grand Island. Walter had a vast repertoire derived from a variety of sources, including printed music and recordings, as well as aural tradition. A more distanced variant appears as “Woody’s Hornpipe,” recorded in the field from the playing of Busch, Arkansas, fiddler James “Skeeter” Walden in 1951 (a transcription appears in Beisswenger & McCann’s *Ozarks Fiddle Music*, 2008). While recognizably a version of “Mountain Hornpipe,” it features a 12-bar second strain.

Douglas’s Favorite

Saunders’ Complete Violin Instruction, 1847

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Woody's Hornpipe

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In the West, Vivian Williams found the tune in the Peter Beemer manuscript, hidden under the title “Durang’s Hornpipe” and the last tune in a set “selected by Louis Gazelli” for a quadrille. Beemer was a miner and a musician from Warren, Idaho, who had moved west (probably from Pennsylvania) and found himself in the local gold rush in the mid-1860s. He collected his tunes from memory, and from other musicians in the mining camps, with whom he formed a band that played in Charles Bemis’s saloon. The repertoire consisted of popular melodies, traditional tunes, opera airs, and printed sheet music, for which Beemer wrote melody lines and arrangements. One of the sheet music sources seems to have been the Saunders violin publication, for which Williams has found evidence (“Polka from Sanderson’s [sic] Violin Instruc-

tor,” for example) in the manuscript. How “Douglas’s Favorite” came to be mis-named “Durang’s Hornpipe” is a mystery, but the titles are just similar enough that the Saunders title was replaced by the more ubiquitous “Durang’s” title—a kind of “folk processing.”

Francis O’Neill printed the tune, note-for-note from the Howe version, in his *Music of Ireland* (1903, No. 1745), as “The Mountains of Kerry,” but he sometimes took what he considered Irish-sounding tunes from earlier printed sources, frequently from the Howe publications, with which he was familiar. There are no Irish antecedents for the tune that have been found to date, and there is no reason to suspect Irish or British Isles provenance for the

The Mountains of Kerry

O’Neill’s *Music of Ireland*, 1903

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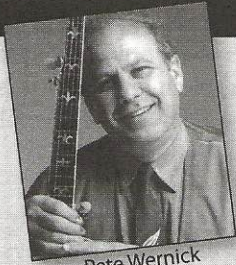
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melody. Some Canadian fiddlers picked up the tune as well, but again, it has been sourced to print. Manitoba fiddler Grant Lamb played the tune, which he learned from his parents, who were musicians who played dances in Ontario for many years. They read music, and, as Grant remarked in liner notes to his album, the tune was available in old printed collections; the family probably learned it from a page. Lamb was a character, says Vivian Williams, who communicated this reminiscence:

He was born in 1915, and was Manitoba fiddle champion in 1953, 1954, and 1955. He was a friend of Don Messer, and wrote “Grant Lamb’s Breakdown,” which Don played and published. He was quite a character. As a farmer in Manitoba, there wasn’t much that could be done on the farm in the early spring, so after we met him in the 1970s, for a number of years he would appear on our doorstep in Seattle sometime in the middle of March. We would ask him how long he planned to stay, and he would reply “No plans, no plans!” and stay with us for a couple of weeks. Needless to say we played a lot of music in that couple of weeks! He was an excellent piano player as well as a fiddler.

Vivian herself learned the tune by ear from Grant’s playing, and so the process of aural transmission again comes into play, distancing the written page.

“Mountain Hornpipe” was recorded on sound recordings fairly early. At the beginning of the 78 RPM era, in 1923, it was recorded by fiddler John Baltzell for the Edison company (51236) and can be heard as the last tune on the “Durang Hornpipe Medley” (a sur-

prising coincidence with the Beemer manuscript, where the tune actually appears as “Durangs”). Baltzell (1860-1940) hailed from Mt. Vernon, Ohio, and was a student there of the by-then elderly blackface-minstrel Dan Emmett, who had returned to the town in 1888 after a life on the road. Baltzell was the son of a shoemaker, who was born and raised in a log cabin, and whose first instrument was the proverbial corn stalk fiddle. Henry Ford’s Dance Music Orchestra, an assemblage of musicians largely from Michigan, recorded the tune as well, fronted by a hammered dulcimer player named L.P. Baxter (the recording can be found on the Library of Congress’s LBC4, *Dance Music: Reels, Polkas and More*, where it can be heard in the cut “A Medley of Reels”). Relatively modern old time recordings of the tune include Melvin Wine (*Cold Frosty Morning*, a 1976 recording on Poplar Records), and James Bryan (*First of May*, Rounder 0215, 1986). Canadian versions can be heard by the great Ontario fiddler Graham Townsend (*Down Home Fiddling*, a 1960s recording on the Audat label), and Manitoba fiddling farmer Grant Lamb (*Tunes from Home*, Voyager VRLP-312, 1974).

[The author is grateful to Vivian Williams and Drew Beisswenger for their contributions to this column.]

[Andrew Kuntz is the author of a book of old time songs and tunes called *Ragged But Right* (1987) as well as the on-line tune encyclopedia “The Fiddlers’ Companion” (www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in Irish music sessions.]