

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

“The Duck’s Eyeball”

(with passing nods to Stephen C. Foster and Charles Dickens)

Names of tunes jump out and grab you sometimes, the intrusion tolerable when they’re attached to a really worthy melody. After mucking through strain after strain of “(So-and-so’s) Reel” or “(my mentor’s) Jig,” or “(an influential fiddler’s) Breakdown,” one sometimes wonders if the true gems of melody one comes across don’t deserve as much quality in title as in musical substance. Of course, this doesn’t take into account the folk process (or the failings of human memory), by which titles regularly become detached from tunes. Still, a good title bound to a good tune is a marriage to be celebrated. Whether “Duck’s Eyeball” is a good title or not will be judged by the reader, but I like it in a quirky way, and it certainly gets attention. The partnering tune is excellent and worth exploration.

We should first define which “Duck’s Eyeball” we’re investigating, for there are two. The one we will not navigate to is the “Duck’s Eyeball” also called “Right in the Middle of a Duck’s Eyeball” by Galax, Virginia, fiddler Luther Davis. Davis’ (1887-1986) “Duck’s Eyeball” is a version of a popular ditty known as “Wait in the Kitchen till the Cook Comes In,” or “Hanging Around the Kitchen ’till the Cook Comes Home” as Missouri fiddler Lyman Enloe (1907-1998) called it. The titles are explained by verses that were attached to the tune. Fiddler Roy Acuff sang:

Wait in the kitchen till the cook comes in,
The cook comes in, the cook comes in.
Wait in the kitchen till the cook comes in.

Stuck my finger in the duck’s eyeball,
The duck’s eyeball, the duck’s eyeball.
Stuck my finger in the duck’s eyeball.

Occasionally body parts other than the eyeball were substituted in the lyric. Acuff may have learned the tune from Tennessee fiddler and bandmate Tommy Magness (1916-1972); or perhaps he knew the tune already but wanted Magness’ version of it, for he bought a home disc recorder in 1948 and had Magness record as much of his older, traditional repertoire as he could. Magness straddled traditional regional repertoire and bluegrass, as did Acuff, and the two evidently enjoyed the older music as well as more modern country stylings. “Duck’s Eyeball” was one of the tunes from those home recording sessions (Wolfe, 2001). This “Duck’s Eyeball” tune is a variant or relative of the tune known as “Richmond Cotillion” or “Old Richmond,” a family that includes “Sally Put a Bug on Me,” “Jackson’s Breakdown,” and “Run them Coons in the Ground.”

The “Duck’s Eyeball” to which our heading bears was popularized by the playing of Lauchlin Shaw of Harnett County, in North Carolina’s Piedmont region. Shaw (1912-2000) was a third-generation farmer who had taught himself to play his father’s fiddle at the age of ten. Lauchlin was a fine dance fiddler whose style paired relatively active melodic lines with rhythmic drive for dancing. He enjoyed a playing partnership with banjoist A.C. Overton for over fifty years, but also gathered a circle of musician friends, young and old. In the 1970s the Shaw house was an unofficial headquarters for old time music in the area with regular gatherings of musicians such as Wayne and Margaret

Duck’s Eyeball

Transcribed by John Lamancusa

render him a conspicuous member of musical, social, and business circles for a period extending over more than three generations.”

From society social dances and the genteel amateur parlor, “Rainbow Schottische” entered American traditional repertoire. It was a memorable melody, particularly the first strain, and its appearance in traditional music was not only limited to North Carolina. Ira Ford included it in his 1940 book *Traditional Music in America*, presumably collected from Missouri dance musicians, as was most of his material. The melody even retained its third, or Trio, part in Ford’s transcription, indicating that the musicians of Ford’s acquaintance were not straying too far from Kleber’s original composition. As a result, Ford’s transcription still yearns for the ballroom rather than the barn. For more distanced, more “folk processed” versions we turn to Professor Samuel Bayard’s great book *Dance to the Fiddle, March to the Fife* (1981), a wonderful collection of fiddle and fife music collected over decades in southwestern Pennsylvania. Bayard collected several variants of the “Rainbow Schottische” tune, although only one, transcribed in the 1930s from George Strosnider, retained Kleber’s title. Strosnider lived near Waynesburgh, Greene County, Pennsylvania, and was aged sixty-nine when Bayard first began visiting him in 1928. His A strain is a paired-down, simple version of Kleber’s schottische, but follows the melodic contour fairly faithfully. His second strain starts out like that of the original, but starts to deviate around the fourth bar. The second half of the strain is merely a repeat of the A strain, so that the form is AABA, following a traditional song form that has been standard for centuries.

Bayard collected three other variants of “Rainbow Schottische,” all with the same first part and a different second part, although only one other had a title. “Right Foot, Left Foot” was from Thomas S. Patterson, who, like Bayard, was a professor at Pennsylvania State University—in Patterson’s case, of Mechanical Engineering. He was born and reared at Elizabeth, Pennsylvania,

where he learned to fiddle, picking up his tunes from his father, Eban Patterson. The tune takes its title, informs Bayard, from a ditty sung to it:

*Right foot, left foot, any foot at all,
Kitty lost her slipper, going to the ball.*

Patterson’s tune starts with the “Rainbow” first part, but then skips to Kleber’s Trio part, omitting the original second strain altogether.

A quite nice, untitled set was collected in 1948 by a fiddler named Hogg. It has the usual A part, married to a B part that is unrelated to the “Rainbow Schottische” tune but which is quite nice and complements the first strain very effectively. In fact, as a fiddle tune goes, it is perhaps the most pleasant of the group, with a nice old time feel. Finally, Bayard collected a version from John Meighan, a singer and fiddler in his eighties in 1930, from Wind Ridge (Jacktown), Greene County. Meighan’s tune is the most distanced from the original, almost in Mixolydian mode instead of major, and quite archaic-sounding. The A part starts off with the usual first two bars, then veers off into entirely new material.

Was “Rainbow Schottische” only a national tune? It certainly seems to have been widespread in American tradition, and in fact it turns up internationally as well. As a ballroom dance, printed versions can be found in other countries as well. A fine sheet music edition was printed in Australia in the 1890s by John Snow and Co., and one can assume some amount of currency there. However, the tune takes a curious turn in England, where it appears not as “Rainbow Schottische” but under the title “Winter(s) Night Schottische.” Why the name changed is unknown, but one cannot help but think it had to do with a wish to evade copyright. Orchestral arrangements for “Winter’s Night Schottische” date from about the 1860s in England, and can be found in London publisher Hopwood and Crew’s *Orchestral Journal*, No. 16, where

Untitled Schottische

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the arrangement (but not actually the composition) is prominently attributed to Charles Coote (1808-1880). Publishing house Hopwood and Crew specialized in popular songs during the latter 19th century, but was half-owned by Coote, who was a composer and arranger of popular pieces for the ballroom, concert hall, and bandstand. Coote was also the director of Coote & Tinney's Band, the premier London dance orchestra, and he was heavily involved in the musical programmes of Queen Victoria's State Balls at Buckingham Palace where he was court band director. Coote's

son, also Charles (1831-1916), followed in his father's footsteps and himself became a composer of popular songs and dance melodies, and was so successful he was able to purchase in 1875 the remaining interest in Hopwood and Crew for the family.

Coote the elder appears to have been an admirer of his London contemporary, writer Charles Dickens. A few of his compositions have titles from Dickens' works, such as "Mugby Junction" (the name of a story by Dickens). The "No Thoroughfare Galop"

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by Charles Coote “as performed nightly at the Adelphi Theatre” (1867-1868) is “By Kind Permission of Charles Dickens Esq.,” and “Coote’s Lancers” and “Somebody’s Luggage” were dedicated to the famous writer. Coote wrote to Dickens in the early 1850s to inquire for permission to use some of the poems contained in his popular works as lyrics for songs the musician planned to compose. Dickens’ reply of January 24, 1853, survives, wherein he politely but very firmly informs Coote that his publisher withholds permission for whatever Coote’s request had been, deeming it an inappropriate use of Dickens’ creative material. In this he undoubtedly was correct, for a popular song could only have devalued the original in the eye of posterity. Dickens suggests Coote look through older volumes of poetry for inspiration—a curiously superficial suggestion that he must have known would not satisfy (perhaps he was putting point to his publisher’s refusal, and letting Coote know there would be no tidbit thrown to him). However, the writer ends his epistle with, “Mrs. Dickens and her sister send their kind regards.” There must have been a passing acquaintance then, and one might surmise that the famous writer and the court band director had social orbits that occasionally coincided.

“Winter’s Night Schottische” appears in Scottish publisher James S. Kerr’s second volume of their popular *Merry Melodies* collection (No. 409), a series of dance melodies issued during the 1880s. It is Kleber’s “Rainbow Schottische” note-for-note, including the Trio part, and is printed without composer attribution. The Kerr appearance of the tune, a widespread publication, seems to have helped to keep the melody in currency and in tradition

in England, where it became firmly ensconced. “Winter’s Night” was played by Gloucestershire fiddler Stephen Baldwin (1873-1955), who was recorded in the field by Russell Wortley in 1954 (re-released on Musical Traditions MTCD334, *Here’s One You’ll Like, I Think*, 2005). Baldwin was a railroad worker and World War I veteran (an infantryman invalided out after the Battle of the Somme) who learned to fiddle from his father, and who passed his father’s instrument on to his own son. The great English collector Cecil Sharp transcribed several tunes from Stephen’s father Charles. Baldwin’s recordings represent one of the few and best examples of the traditional English fiddler and have been quite influential in modern times. In fact, our melody is sometimes today called “Stephen Baldwin’s Schottische” in his honor. “Winter’s Night” was also recorded in Sussex, albeit like some of Bayard’s American variants, without a name. Concertina player Lewis “Scan” Tester and friend and fiddler Bill Gorringer were recorded playing the melody (untitled), while in Norfolk hammered dulcimer player Billy Bennington and fiddler Harry Cox on the fiddle also played it. The schottische was later picked up by the group Pyewackett, given a more modern treatment, and recorded on their 1985 album *7 to Midnight*.

Finally, the melody made an appearance in (the north of) Ireland, although how long it might have been in tradition among Irish fiddlers is unknown. As with many schottisches in Ireland “Rainbow Schottische” became a barn dance (although also characterized as a “hornpipe” or “set dance”) and was divorced from its original name. Instead, it is known by the player’s name from whom it was learned. Thus it came to be recorded by County Fermanagh flute player Cathal McConnell (of the Boys of the Lough), who called it “Andy Kerrin’s” on his 1978 solo album *On Lough Erne Shore*. Kerrin was a musician from Derrylin, County Fermanagh. It was recorded by the husband-and-wife team of County Louth fiddler and banjo player Gerry O’Connor and the late flute player and singer Eithne Ni Uallachain on their 1995 Claddagh album *La Lugh*. On the recording it is called “Tommy Bhetty’s Hornpipe,” the title being a nod to Tommy “Bhetty” McCarthy (“Bhetty” is an appellation that means “son of Betty,” given to differentiate him from another local, Tommy “Puck” McCarthy).

Like a few other schottisches, “Rainbow Schottische” achieved popularity far beyond its local region (see also “A Well-Traveled Melody” in *Fiddler Magazine*, Spring 2007, vol. 14, No. 1). There are some interesting juxtapositions with this melody, however. Kleber and Coote were not dissimilar in their output of popular dance music, their success, and their entrepreneurial spirit, and even in their proximity to more lastingly famous artists.

[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.]

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