

# Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

## The Contour of Fiddle Tunes

Last issue's Fiddle Tune History column traced some of the vicissitudes of the popular melody "Maggie in the Woods," at the end of which I suggested there might be more to the story of the tune. There is, but thinking about the twists and turns (and even contortions!) that such extended traces take gave me pause, and brought me back again to some of my foundation material for tune history research.

In the latter half of the 20th century the concept of "tune family" became a popular paradigm. It was, in a word, "cute" to liken tunes to human families; to see relationships between similar melodies likened to biological siblings, parents, and ever more distant cousins. Such "family" tracings often led to surprising discoveries, hidden connections, and interesting juxtapositions; however, they just as frequently led to odd intersections and incomprehensible assertions. As it turns out, the analogy of tunes-as-human family breaks down fairly quickly under scrutiny, not the least because of two factors. The first is that one's definition of "tune family" is variable, with some "hearing" connections that others do not, or assigning a relatedness that others find obscure. Samuel Bayard, who is perhaps the seminal figure for the "tune family" concept with folk melodies, cast a wide net in his tune research and drew in melodies from a wide variety of sources; his delight was tracing tune strains from obscure international and

historical sources. When successful, his research lent wonderful context to a tune, but when it missed the mark it left you scratching your head in perplexity. The second problem is that it is a "reductionist" theory – it reduces complex entities to their simplest and most superficial levels. An obvious example of the problem of tunes-as-family is that humans never have a single progenitor, and when Bayard suggests (as he sometimes does) that related or possibly related tunes derive from "one ancestral tune" he runs afoul of reductionist assertion.

This doesn't mean that Bayard and tune family theorists are wrong, only that it's useful to think somewhat more cleverly about how music is formed and transmitted in culture by folk musicians. This work was forwarded by James R. Cowdery in his 1984 article "A Fresh Look at the Concept of Tune Family" in *Ethnomusicology* (vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 495-504). Cowdery's contribution was to add to the existing "tune family" concept an understanding of the organic way that musicians learn, perform, and transmit melodies within a style. In essence, his contribution moves thinking of tune relatedness away from looking at melodies as if they were in some kind of family tree or genogram map, toward thinking of tunes as made up of organic strains of melody that can be combined in a number of ways but that still retain characteristics that identify them with a style, genre, or tune family. He is thinking of tunes as composed of strands of DNA rather than as individuals. This is in keeping with the way a folk musician learns tunes and blends tune families into one another, as it allows for flexibility and overlapping.

Cowdery thought three concepts relevant to a more organic way of looking at tune family relatedness. He refined Bayard's thinking

Example: Comparing the contours of tunes

### Maggie in the Woods



### The Humours of Ballydesmond



### Lee Rig



### Maggie Pickens



on the “outlining” principle, in which tunes are related through a similar overall contour, or what he called “constant melodic correspondence.” Cowdery even thought that cadences or final notes were not that important in determining whether a tune belonged in a family or not – as he said, “contour will out, cadence and final notwithstanding.”

The second concept he called the “conjoining” principle, in which tunes can be grouped by sections they have in common, while other sections differ. He pointed out that a large number of Irish dance tunes have second strains that have comparatively familiar material in common, while the first parts are more individual and distinct and tend to identify a tune. Indeed, many traditional fiddle tunes trade stock parts that also show up in other tunes, whether the musician is aware of it or not. There are numerous recorded instances of fiddlers playing tunes in their repertory that they consider separate and distinct, yet are nearly identical in one strain.

It is the third of Cowdery’s concepts that is most divergent from original “tune family” thinking. If, as he says, the first principle allows for comparison of wholes to whole, and the second for comparing sections to sections, the third states that tunes can be “recombined” wherein similar melodic motifs – strands of musical DNA – can be utilized in various ways in a variety of tunes. Analogous to DNA, the process of tune composition in traditional music often occurs when pools of shared melodic material are dipped into and transformed in new ways. It is through exercise of the recombining principle, states Cowdery, in “which folk music continues to thrive and replenish itself.” It also accounts for why session musicians, hearing a snatch of melody, join in, only to find themselves playing a tune different from, but similar to, the one others are playing; they pick up on a section of the tune that has been recombined in different ways for use in other tunes. This is also the way in which one tune family morphs into another tune family, as successive recombinations of melodic material eventually take on enough distinctive character to form new tune families.

Let’s see how these theories might apply to some of the assertions for an extended “Maggie in the Woods” tune family. “The Humours of Ballydesmond” has been noted to be a similar Irish polka. A comparison of the first strains of the tunes results in a nearly identical melodic contour, and in my experience the tunes are occasionally confused in session play as a result. Comparison of the second strains of the tunes produces a similar result, although perhaps not as marked as in the first two strains. The third strain of “Humours of Ballydesmond” is dissimilar and has no correspondent in the “Maggie” tune. Thus we have a fit for the “outlining” principal, and the third part of “Ballydesmond” could be considered an example of a “conjoined” part.

It has been suggested that “Maggie in the Woods” is also related to the old Scottish melody “The Lee Rig,” originally a song but set as a reel in numerous 18th century publications dating from the 1740s. Comparing “Maggie in the Woods” with “The Lee Rig” (as printed by James Aird in 1782), there is no directly shared melodic material, but we do note that there is a general contour resemblance. They both have an initial valley that climbs to a peak, descending to another valley, a final peak and rest.

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If we compare the first two strains of “Maggie in the Woods” with “Maggie Pickens,” an Irish melody that has been likened to “Maggie in the Woods” and also “The Lee Rig,” we have contours that generally resemble one another, but with no directly shared melodic material. Yet the peaks and valleys of the tunes occur with a rough similarity. A comparison of “Lee Rig” and “Maggie Pickens” shows directly shared melodic material and a similar contour, save the melody toward the end of the strains, which diverges markedly before combining again.

One might conjecture from this analysis that the older tunes, the Ulster “Maggie Pickens” and the Scottish “Lee Rig” have some concordance that the eye can see and the ear can verify. They are considered “cognate” tunes, the fancy term for “related” or “connected.” So, too, are the cognate tunes “Humours of Ballydesmond” and “Maggie in the Woods,” both more recent folk melodies. Ultimately, the relationship between the two tune families depends on the listener. There is ample evidence to verify a general melodic similarity, but whether a listener would see a relationship between the families is uncertain. Some see a connection; others do not, but such is the fun of session debate.

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