

BENNY THOMASSON AND THE TEXAS FIDDLING TRADITION¹

by Michael Mendelson

In June, 1922, two men, one in full cowboy regalia, the other in Civil War uniform, came into the Victor Talking Machine recording studios in New York City seeking an audition. Probably, as the story goes, just to get rid of them, the Victor people agreed to record Eck Robertson and Henry Gilliland. The resulting recording, "Arkansaw Traveler" backed with "Sally Gooden" (Victor 18956), is generally accepted to be the first commercial "hillbilly" release.² Of particular interest here is the fact that the solo performance of "Sally Gooden" by Eck Robertson is also the first known example of the Texas style of fiddling on a sound recording.³

Because Robertson's recording was the first of its kind, it would seem safe to assume that his rendition was not learned from a media-oriented tradition. To be sure we cannot dismiss the possibility of influence from radio and records on his playing: the record industry had reached a peak in 1922 with sales nearing one hundred million.⁴ In addition, Robertson and Gilliland sought out the record company, not vice versa. But although both radio and the phonograph were widespread by this time, WSB Atlanta, possibly the first radio station in the South to feature country music, began operation only three months before the famous recording session in New York.⁵ Thus, although Robertson could have been influenced by records and radio in a general way, his first recordings must have been largely uninfluenced by the media in his specific genre, country fiddling.

A comparison of Eck Robertson's performance (and those of other early Texas fiddlers) with present-day Texas fiddling shows that many of the distinct stylistic elements now used were already in existence before 1930. Robertson's "Sally Gooden", for example, incorporated no fewer than thirteen distinct strains, a device that seems fairly unusual in the Anglo-American instrumental tradition, where a tune usually consists of only two parts; a "coarse" or "A" part, and a "fine", or "B" part, with perhaps an octave repetition.⁶ Whether or not he originated the idea of conscious and deliberate variation in the fiddle tune, it has proven to be one of the most distinctive elements of the Texas style. In fact, Robertson's version of "Sally Gooden," with many of the original strains fairly intact, is still played today by Texas fiddlers.⁷ Another example of early Texas fiddling, Ervin Solomon and Joe Hughes' somewhat "slow," double fiddle rendition of "Sally Johnson," recorded in Dallas in 1929, also seems generally in accord with Texas fiddling today. Similarly, the repertoire and manner of performance of the East Texas Serenaders, a string band from Lindale, demonstrated the influence of popular music on the musicians of that area, thus foreshadowing the development of Western Swing.⁸

As Charles Faurot states in the liner notes to Benny Thomasson: Country Fiddling From the Big State, the Texas fiddling tradition consists of three main categories: "old-time," Western Swing, and contest fiddling.⁹ These categories are, in fact, closely interrelated. The roots of the first category, "old-time" fiddling, are probably very similar

to those of fiddling traditions in the rest of the South. Derived primarily from the Irish and Scottish traditions, the repertoire and manner of performance was carried down the Appalachian chain and into the Southwest with the settlers. Of course as the music spread it underwent changes, and local and regional styles emerged. Many of the tunes found in Texas, for instance "Ragtime Annie," "Sally Gooden," and others, are found throughout the South, and even in the North. Yet Faurot states that very early the Texans had developed their own style. He mentions (referring in this case specifically to Benny Thomasson's father and uncle) that they played differently from fiddlers in Georgia or even near-by Arkansas. They used longer bow strokes and performed expanded versions of tunes, using additional, distinct strains.¹⁰

A tradition of jazz and popular dance music played by fiddle bands existed before the development of the Western Swing band.¹¹ In an article on the history of the East Texas Serenaders, a semiprofessional group from Lindale, Texas, Fred G. Hoeptner tells how during the mid 1920s to early '30s the "house party" was a favorite type of get-together in rural Texas.¹² At these functions, round dancing, done to tunes such as "Five Foot Two" and "Down Yonder" was more popular than square dancing, done to hoedown music. Since the first Serenaders recordings, some of which have a definite popular and blues feeling, pre-date the formation of Bob Wills' first recognizable band (approximately 1929) by at least a year, and his first recordings by nearly four years (1932 with the Fort Worth Doughboys), it is apparent that already established forces were in play during Wills' formative years.¹³ Western Swing grew out of that tradition, and the most popular Western Swing groups, such as Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, and Milton Brown and His Musical Brownies, in turn influenced the fiddling tradition.

But during this time the third, and perhaps most important factor was continuing to influence the Texas fiddling tradition. Perhaps more than in any other part of the country, the fiddling contest has had a pronounced effect on both the manner of performance and the conception of performance. To be sure, other parts of the country have a contest tradition. But in the Southeast this tradition seems to have been secondary to the string band, and more recently the Bluegrass band tradition. In the Northeast and Canada, a strong contest tradition exists, although the rules tend to favor a more "Old World" favor to the tunes. In all cases, the contest tradition tends to reinforce already existing concepts of performance. In Texas this has meant the incorporation of repertoire and techniques from a variety of sources.

As Charles Faurot notes, in Texas, "Almost any reason will serve as an excuse for a fiddle contest..." whether it be a rodeo, anniversary of a town founding, St. Patrick's Day or a "Yamboree"--- a yam harvest festival.¹⁴ As these contests were (are) quite common and occasionally lucrative (Ervin Solomon is said to have supported his family on the winnings from such contests during the depression¹⁵), there naturally evolved a keen sense of competition. This in turn led to the deliberate practice of developing more and more elaborate versions of tunes to present as show pieces at the contest. The contest also stressed the importance of the fiddle as a solo instrument, as opposed to the band concept so prevalent in the Southeast.

One of the most influential of the Texas fiddlers, and a man still active today is Benny Thomasson. He was born in Runnels County, Texas on 22 April 1909, and raised around Gatesville. In his early childhood he came under the direct influence of many fiddlers: both his father Luke and his uncle Ed were well known in the area as excellent

fiddlers, and in addition, many other fiddlers such as Eck Robertson and Lefty Franklin would often come to visit the Thomasson household and stay a few days to fiddle. At a very early age Benny took up the instrument and was soon playing in contests and on the radio. At the contests he would often be competing against such fiddlers as Ervin Solomon and Major Franklin and it was here that he picked up many of the ideas he incorporated into his own style. In addition, he would also sit in with dance bands in the area. He says he knew Bob Wills and would sometimes sit in with the band when they were in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. He never played professionally, however, although he did cut two sides for Okeh in San Antonio in 1929. Unfortunately they were never released: possibly the wax masters were lost or broken in transit.¹⁶

A few years ago Benny retired from the auto repair business and moved to Washington state to be with his son, Dale. While in the area he was "re-discovered" by John Burke who arranged for him to play at the Northwest Regional Folklife Festival in Seattle. A month later, in June 1972, Benny made his first trip to Weiser, Idaho, and the National Old Time Fiddlers' Contest. At that time a recording was made which was subsequently released as Voyager VRLP 309, A Jam Session With Benny & Jerry Thomasson. A transcription "Cripple Creek" from that recording accompanies this article.

That year Benny took third place in the open competition, placing behind only J. C. Broughton and Dick Barret (one of Benny's proteges from Texas), who won the title for the second consecutive year. In 1973 Benny again placed third at Weiser, behind Barret, and Herman Johnson, who took his third title in six years.

In 1974 however, Benny swept the competition, winning not only the National title, but also the Senior's title, the Northwest Area title, and the award for the best-liked fiddler as voted by the competing fiddlers.

As evidenced by his album on County Records, Benny Thomasson: Country Fiddling From the Big State,¹⁷ Benny Thomasson has strong roots in "old time" fiddling, but perhaps the strongest influence on his playing has been the contest tradition. In his own words, from an interview conducted last June at Weiser:¹⁸

Now I'll tell you a little story about that. There was a fiddle contest in Dallas. I guess I was about 18, 17-18 years old. And I thought, boy, I was just a good fiddler, you know when you're that age, and you do play ... pretty well, you think, by doggies its going to take somebody pretty hard to beat you, you know, I got up there, there's 250 fiddlers. Howdy Forrester, Georgia Slim, all these guys. And the top fiddlers in the nation you might say. And I got up there, and boy, I laid that "Grey Eagle" on there goin' and a-comin'. I come to find out that nobody even recognized me'. The judges didn't even scratch me. So from that time on, I went to work on that thing.

I said, "well" to myself, "self, you got to do something now." And I just made it a point to keep to continue to work, working, working on those tunes.

As evidenced by his playing today it seems he did just that. Benny seldom limits his renditions of tunes to just two strains. Often using higher positions on the fiddle, intricate double-stop slides and other devices, he is continually varying the basic tune. Again in

his own words (in response to the question "Do you play similar to the way your dad played?"):

Well, no. I'll tell you what. See those old tunes, back in those days was just little two-part tunes and they never had any variation to 'em. Now I play the same old tunes, but then I have arranged variations of the same parts in different positions on the fiddle, see.

And like you'd be playing an old tune like "Dusty Miller" or something, and the low part there, and then you get up there on your higher positions and make it sound... get a little bit different variation, and get a good sound out of it. And it don't make it come back to the same old monotonous. two-part deals there...

Thus we find that he is working with a kind of instrumental analog of an "oral formulaic" process. Working from a conception of the basic tune he expands and improvises on it. From a comparison of many of Benny's performances of the same tune, it is apparent that he holds a basic idea of what he is going to do before he plays, for the variant strains are usually similar from performance to performance, but the details are added during the actual playing.

The jazz tradition has also had an impact on Benny's playing. During the interview he indicated a familiarity with the music of Django Reinhardt, and the jazz violinists Stephane Grappelly and Florian ZaBach, as well as his involvement with Western Swing. With respect to the latter he mentioned that:

...used to, before I d play in a fiddle contest, I d play a swing tune, that's bring me down to my perfect timing, you see, on those hoedowns...

To get an idea of some of the general features of Texas fiddling, and Benny's fiddling in particular, I have included a transcription of his playing.¹⁹ "Cripple Creek" was chosen as it is a well known tune, and can thus be used to point out certain features common to the Texas style of performance. Obviously a written transcription cannot adequately represent an aural event, so the reader is encouraged to listen to the sound recording. The actual performance took place in a jam session in Weiser, Idaho in June 1972 at the National Old Time Fiddlers' Contest.

To make the transcription easier to read, I have notated the 16th note patterns as four equal 16th notes. Actually the first and third notes of each figure are usually longer than the second and fourth, approximating an 8th note-16th note triplet figure. In addition, some of the double stops have been omitted in order not to obscure the melodic line.

One characteristic common to much of Texas fiddling is the tendency to play in long phrases, as demonstrated by the (A) strains in the transcription. Whereas a Southeastern fiddler might phrase in 2-bar sections, for instance placing an 8th note "e" instead of the 16th note "e-a" figure in the second beat of measure 2-strain (A1), the Texas fiddler is just as likely to run the entire 8 bars together in one phrase. This device is quite common, and one of the most distinctive features of the Texas style.

Parallel to this type of phrasing is the tendency to complement rather than contrast the rhythmic background. Severe syncopation, so common in Bluegrass fiddling, for

example, is largely absent in Texas fiddling. Rather, there is a tendency toward a smooth "flow" of the melodic line.

As melodic invention is stressed, the tunes tend to be played a bit slower than in other parts of the country. Long, single-note bow strokes, and intricate left hand work are very common. The triplet and sextuplet patterns are not unusual.

It is interesting to note that the variations are often built on chord changes rather than the melodic line, following in the jazz tradition, an example being the strains marked (C) on the transcription of "Cripple Creek." Whereas the (A) and (B) strains follow the commonly known melodic line, the (C) strains do not. Rather, they arpeggiate and ornament the chordal structure of the tune.

As a final note, Jerry Thornasson's backup guitar work (in this case, tenor guitar) should be mentioned. Whereas the guitarist in the Southeast might be expected to use only the A, D, and E chords in backing the first half of The (A) strain of "Cripple Creek":

A/A // D/ A // A/ A // E / A //

The Texas guitarist would be expected to use the A, D, and E chords and also use the D#dim7 and B7 chords:

A/A // D/D#dim7 // A/A // B7/ D //

in conjunction with a well defined bass line of:



In Benny Thomasson's case, the musicianship has been matched by a genuine warmth and human-ness, sometimes lacking in innovative musicians. Perhaps a glimpse of this can be seen in his willingness to share what he knows, and learn from others. In his own words:

You know, young people coming up, learning to fiddle, they want to do everything they can... in more modern ways, you know. Times changes. And I think... that as time changes, music should change to fit the playing now and 30-40 years from then, I couldn't even touch 'em, see. Well, I like that, I mean that'd be fine.

Footnotes

- 1) A slightly different version of this paper was read at the Southern California Academy of Sciences meeting, California State University, Fullerton, 1974.

I would like to thank the following people for their comments and criticisms in preparing this paper: Norm Cohen, Nancy Dols, Frank Ferrel, James Porter, Benny Thomasson and D.K. Wilgus.

- 2) John Cohen, "Fiddlin' Eck Robertson," Sing Out! 14:2 (1964) pp. 55-59.
- 3) Bill C. Malone, Country Music USA. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1968), pp. 33-78, discusses the early recording of hillbilly music in more detail.

As Malone (p. 39) and others have noted [for example, Thomas A. Ekkens "Earliest?? Folkers? On Disc," in Record Research #92 (1968), pp. 4 & 10] there were earlier recordings of fiddlers and other folk performers on disc and cylinder. As early as 1894 Columbia had issued recordings of banjo pieces supposedly based on folk melodies, and in 1914 Victor introduced recordings featuring Charles Ross Taggart as "Uncle Zed" playing the fiddle [Ekkens, pp. 4 & 10]. None of these, however, can be considered to be part of the direct evolution of the hillbilly industry.

- 4) Malone, p. 37.
- 5) Ibid p. 35.
- 6) In the liner notes to Texas Hoedown (County 703), Charles Faurot credits the following anecdote to Eck Robertson. "Seems that Sally was being courted by two men, both fiddlers. Well she couldn't make up her mind so she told them to start fiddling and she would marry the winner. That old boy named Goodin won, and true to her word she married him. Since then there have been thirteen generations of 'Goodins' and so I'm going to play 'Sally Goodlin' thirteen different ways.
- 7) For example, Bartow Riley's rendition on Texas Hoedown, (County 703).
- 8) Both groups are represented on Texas Farewell: Texas Fiddlers Recorded 1922-1930 (County 517).
- 9) Benny Thomasson: Country Fiddling From the Big State (County 724).
- 10) Ibid.
- 11) For an insight into other musical traditions relating directly to Western Swing, the reader is referred to John Solomon Otto and Augustus M. Burns', "John 'Knocky' Parker - A Case Study of White and Black Musical Interaction, " JEMF Quarterly #33 (1974), pp. 23-26.
- 12) Fred G. Hoeptner, "The Story of an Early Fiddle Band: East Texas Seranders" in Disc Collector #17 (1961), pp. 8-11.

- 13) Bob Healy, et. al., "Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys: A Bio-Discography," Record Research #79 (1966) pp. 3-5; #80 (1966) pp. 3-5; #81 (1967) p. 10; #82 (1967) pp. 3-7.
- 14) Texas Fiddle Favorites (County 707).
- 15) Texas Farewell: Texas Fiddlers Recorded 1922-1930 (County 517).
- 16) Information found in this paragraph is taken from the following sources: The liner notes to County 724, Benny Thomasson: Country Fiddling From the Big State; An interview with Benny Thomasson conducted at the National Old Time Fiddlers' Contest, June, 1973, by Michael Mendelson and David Garelick; Correspondence to the author from Frank Ferrel, August, 1974; Okeh: files. the titles cut for Okeh on 27 June 1929, by the Thomasson Brothers, were "Scolding Wife" (W402756) and "Star Waltz" (W402757).
- 17) Benny Thomasson: Country Fiddling From the Big State, (County 724).
- 18) This quote and those that follow were taken from the interview that accompanies this article. The actual interview was conducted at the National Old Time Fiddlers' Contest in Weiser, Idaho, June, 1973, by Michael Mendelson and David Garelick. Portions of the interview appear in The Devil's Box 24 (1974) pp. 19-26 under the title "An Interview With Benny Thomasson," by David Garelick. The transcription accompanying the present article is by the author.
- 19) From A Jam Session With Benny & Jerry Thomasson (Voyager VRLP 309).

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BENNY THOMASSON DISCOGRAPHY

County 703: *Texas Hoedown* (ca. 1965)

| | |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Billy in the Low Ground | Black Mountain Rag |
| Ace of Spades | Laughing Boy |
| Bonaparte's Retreat | Lady's Fancy |

County 724: *Country Fiddling From the Big State* (ca. 1970)

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Dry and Dusty | Jack of Diamonds |
| Bumblebee in the Gourdvine | Drunkard's Hiccups |
| Don't Let Your Deal Go Down | Black and White Rag |
| Bitter Creek | Tug Boat |
| Midnight On the Water | Dusty Miller |
| Nigger in the Woodpile | Lost Indian |
| Tom and Jerry | |

Voyager VRLP 309: *A Jam Session With Benny and Jerry Thomasson* (ca. 1973)

| | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Cripple Creek | Billy in the Low Ground |
| Salt River | Don't Let the Deal Go Down |
| Apple Blossom | That's A-Plenty |
| Liverpool Hornpipe | Kansas City Kitty |
| Paddy On the Turnpike / | Jack of Diamonds |
| Snowbird in the Ashes | Grey Eagle |
| Sally Johnson | Soppin the Gravy |
| Draggin' the Bow | Cotton Patch Rag |
| Leather Britches | Hotfoot |
| Wagoner | Durang's Hornpipe |
| | Twinkle Little Star |

Oldtime Fiddling and Other Folk Music, Weiser, Idaho, 1972 (Weiser, Idaho, Chamber of Commerce)

Black and White Rag

Oldtime Fiddling and other Folk Music, Weiser, Idaho, 1973

Prairie Schottische