

# ***MUSICAL TRADITIONS***

## **Honoring The Tradition**

By Stewart Hendrickson

Music builds on tradition. Sometimes the tradition evolves gradually, other times big jumps are taken. As musicians we have all been exposed to different types of music in our past. How we treat this musical history, build upon it or change it, delve deeper into it or ignore it, is important in our growth as musicians.

Tradition can be thought of as something fixed in time and structure, or it can be something that changes or evolves over time. Should we approach traditional music as set museum pieces, or should we use it as a stepping-off point for our own music? If the latter is our choice, how do we proceed? How do we honor those who have gone before?

First, we need to be aware of the tradition. Many first and second generation Americans have rediscovered the ethnic music of their parents and grandparents, sometimes after initially rejecting it as too old-fashioned. Often this happens when they have children and realize that they have an ethnic background that needs to be passed down. Or someone may ask them about their own ethnic music, and they realize they have no answers.

Cookie Segelstein is a klezmer violinist I met at the American Festival of Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend several years ago. She is first-generation American; her parents were holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe. But Cookie was born in Kansas City, and grew up in an environment as far from her ethnic heritage as possible. "I had no Jewish friends, dated no Jewish boys, and stopped going to synagogue after my bas mitzvah. I wanted nothing to do with this world of pain. I studied music, received a Master's in Music from Yale, and became a working classical musician. I eventually married a non-Jewish man."

Then she had her first child. "All that I had turned away from, the richness of tradition, my father's history, and especially the music of the Jewish people all of a sudden became the most important thing in my life besides my child. I called my folks daily with questions. What were the names of all who perished? What was the klezmer band like in their towns? How do you make cholent?" She realized that she was a critical link in this tradition and wanted to pass it on to her own children. She became more active as a klezmer violinist to the point of it taking over her classical career, and is now most comfortable expressing herself in her own ethnic culture.

One of the exciting things about klezmer music is that it is continuously evolving. Eastern European Jews carried the klezmer tradition to America, mixing with and picking up elements of American popular and jazz music in the early 20th century. It almost died out, but was rediscovered by a new generation of Jewish youth in the 1970's, and has now undergone a tremendous revival. It has fused with other musical traditions, and our current music is much richer because of it.

The folk music craze of the '60s is another example of building upon the tradition. The immediate carriers of this tradition were people like Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly (Huddie Ledbetter), and Pete Seeger. But it goes back before that to people like John and Alan Lomax and others who were collecting music from Appalachia, the South and other places, and recording the traditional musicians before their music became lost in the urbanization of America.

The rural roots of folk music changed in an urban environment. The authenticity of rural people singing of their hardships, simple pleasures and protests was lost in a new generation of urban singers. Nothing sounds so hollow as the songs of Guthrie and Lead Belly coming from the lips city singers who know nothing of that rural life.

A new type of folk music evolved around the urban environment – phony trios singing pseudo-traditional songs more akin to Tin Pan Alley, Vietnam war protest songs, and the new singer songwriter genre. Many of these songs are good, but they are far removed from the tradition. Others were more commercial pop and have mercifully disappeared.

During the folk craze of the '60s Irish music was introduced into popular American culture by such groups as The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, The Dubliners, and The Chieftains. This music later fell under the heading of “Celtic Music.” The term “Celtic” encompasses the people of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Isle of Man, Brittany, Northumbria, and Galicia. This term has lost most of its meaning (who knows what kind of music the pre-historic Celts made?), and is now just a marketing term to label bins in record stores.

Like American folk music, Celtic music has lost much of its traditional roots. Its latest revival in Riverdance has taken it to a commercial level that would be unrecognized by the traditional musicians of old Ireland, and it has lost much of its tradition.

However, there are other musicians who have honored the tradition while still allowing their music to evolve to higher levels in different ways. Dale Russ of Seattle with his various bands, Setanta, The Suffering Gaels, and Crumac, has embraced Irish music with a deep respect for its tradition, and at the same time raised the art of the Irish fiddle to a high level. Kevin Burke of Portland and Martin Hayes formerly of Seattle have grown from their Irish roots to become two of the most respected Irish fiddlers in the world. Their music has stayed within the tradition, but has also brought the tradition to a new level of playing and interpretation.

William Pint and Felicia Dale, international touring musicians from Seattle, have taken traditional songs of the sea and sea shanties, mostly from the traditions of the British Isles and France, and infused them with driving rhythms and sounds of guitar, hurdy-gurdy, mandolin and other instruments. Their music, while still true to the tradition, has a fresh contemporary sound. They also sing contemporary songs that sound like they are straight out of the tradition. They do this through a real understanding of the history and stories of the sea.

Two other musicians, Tania Opland and Mike Freeman, who split their home between Suquamish, Washington and Kilkenny, Ireland, combine their Alaskan and Eastern European roots to interpret traditional music from around the world in new and exciting ways. This they do with hammered dulcimer, guitar, violin, cittern, Native American flute, percussion, and perhaps a few other instruments to play music steeped in tradition, but with a contemporary sound.

Honoring the tradition thus involves having a knowledge of what went before, of history and of people, and a willingness to grow musically. It is exciting to see the tradition continually evolving, and yet respecting its roots.

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