

# George Wilson: Northern Fiddler

By Susan Conger

*Even from outside the dance hall, through the open windows the fiddle has a snap and drive to it that makes you hurry inside to see who's behind that bow arm. Up on stage, above the flurry of tapping feet, you see a lanky form, a quick grin and an utterly relentless right arm: George Wilson. George, a self-described "Northern fiddler," has been playing for dances and concerts in the Northeast for over twenty years. He's coaxed everything from original melodies to Chinese tunes from his fiddle, but his special love is the music of Cape Breton.*

*George plays with a number of different bands, including The Whippersnappers (which he characterizes as more of a concert band than a dance band), Taconic Tonic (playing Cape Breton and Balkan music), and Kitchen Ceili (playing Irish music). He's also played for Vanaver Caravan, a performing dance troupe that's stretched his playing into higher positions and even more eclectic music.*

*How did you get started on the fiddle, and when?*

Well, let's see... I was in a rock and roll band in college and I mentioned to somebody that I had an old fiddle up in the attic. My older half-sister had given me one lesson on the violin when I was nine — so I am classically trained! [laughs]

*Was she a violinist?*

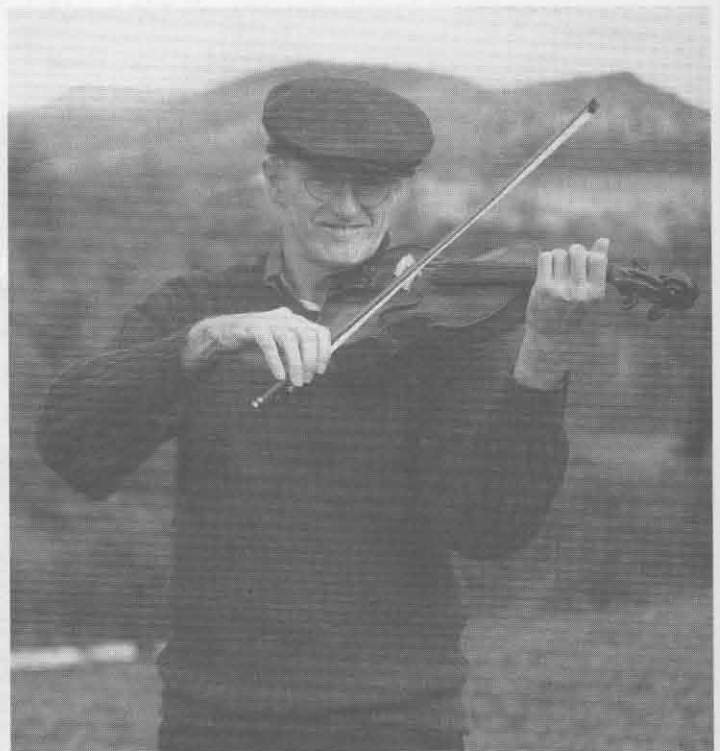
Yeah, she played violin when she was younger.

*So how come you only had one lesson?*

Well, I guess I wasn't that interested. So anyway, I was in this rock and roll band and mentioned about the fiddle up in the attic, and one of the guys in the band said, "Hey, you ought to try playing it," and I was young and impressionable and I said, "Yeah, I guess I should." So I got it out and strung it up the best I could. I tried playing rock and roll on it, with mixed results... I knew there was an old guy down the road from where I was living that had played fiddle in the 1930s. So I thought, "Okay, there's such a thing as northern fiddle style." I knew the popular thing was southern fiddle. Any fiddle music that I ever heard from anyone else was southern style. But I said, "Well, I'm not a Southerner, so I'm going to find out what northern fiddle music is and play that."

*Where were you growing up?*

Up near Hudson Falls, New York, a little town called Kingsbury. That's where I was born and I lived there for about forty years.



*And this guy who played northern fiddle...*

Oh, so I ended up going down to see him, but he was in his eighties and he shook so bad he couldn't play anymore. I tried to figure it out. I had just started going to contradances...and then I got a Jean Carignan record. That kind of set the course pretty well there.

*Did you know anything about Carignan when you got the record?*

No, I didn't. A friend of mine had somehow come across the record, an Elektra record called *Jean Carignan, the Folk Fiddler that Electrified the Newport Folk Festival in 1961*. I still have it; it's still a great record.

*So there you were with your Jean Carignan recording...*

Yeah, I started trying to imitate that, pretty poorly, but trying anyway. I puttered around with that for awhile, and then I met Allan Block, who played up at the North Bennington (Vermont) contradances. I ended up starting to play guitar for him. That was a good apprenticeship, playing guitar for a real fiddle player. He and I went to Europe a couple of times, in the fall of 1973 and 1974. So I got a lot of influence there.

When I got back from one of those trips, I was pawing through a record bin in a W.T. Grant store, and there was a bunch of fiddle records that I didn't know anything about. There were a couple of records of Graham Townsend, and I had no idea who he was, and then there were a couple of records of [Winston] Scotty Fitzgerald, and I had no idea who *he* was. But the Scotty Fitzgerald record had a lot more tunes on it, so I figured "I might as well get the one with the most tunes on it," which was a real good choice. I listened to it, and it was kind of strange at first, but I kept listening to it, and the more I listened, the more I loved it, Cape Breton fiddling. So I got hooked on that.

*That was how that whole Cape Breton connection started?*

Yeah, that's how it got started. Well, that same store ended up having most of the Scotty Fitzgerald albums. I got all of those, and I still have 'em. He was my hero; still is — one of them. Somewhere along the line I got some Louis Beaudoin records; I learned a bunch of those tunes, so he was another of my heroes.

Then a turning point came in my fiddle style. I'd *heard* this Scotty Fitzgerald stuff, and Jean Carignan, but I couldn't really imagine how to *do* it because I hadn't seen any of them play. But then I ended up playing bass on the *New England Chestnuts* records, in about 1980, with Rodney Miller and all those people. Watching Rod play, the swing that he put into his playing, that was really influential. Watching somebody at the same time as hearing them helps a lot. So I think I play more like Rodney Miller did back then, than he does now. Joe Cormier was another influence. He has such a nice bounce to his playing.

*I've never seen anybody play waltzes the way that you play them. It's almost ferocious!*

[laughs] I play everything ferociously! It's still the rock and roll mentality. I've always played ferociously — that's as good a word as any, I guess — or intensely, maybe — that's a more positive-sounding word.

*It's true; I've noticed it in all your playing, but I notice it particularly in waltzes, because it's very unusual.*

Well, I just love playing. I love playing the fiddle. Sometimes it feels like I should have a warning label on me that says, "Warning! Contents: Music under pressure."

*You told how you made your connection with Cape Breton music, but now it seems like Cape Bretoners have made a connection with you — I notice Jerry Holland has one of your tunes in one of his tune collections.*

That's the main connection, that one tune, the "Sweet Journeys" waltz. It was 1991, he was at the Champlain Valley Festival and I went up there just for the fun of it, and ended up teaching him that tune in the parking lot. I saw Ken Perlman last week and he told me they're playing that tune all over the Maritimes, which was nice. And somebody in Australia recorded it, too, who had learned it from Jerry.

*Do you do a lot of teaching?*

A fair amount...you know, never having taken lessons on the instrument, really, I have to be a little creative. I think up odd things to teach people.

*Like what?*

Well, when they're not getting a good sound, I've taken to having people try bowing with just their thumb and index finger. In order to control the bow at all, you have to push it into the string, and you get a lot cleaner sound that way. I've tried for a long time

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explaining it in other ways, but that all of a sudden consolidated the whole thing.

*Do you have them put their thumb under the frog for that?*

No, just in the normal place. I got inspired to try that by a picture in Jerry Holland's tune book, of him sitting there playing just like that; his other fingers are up in the air, he's just holding the bow with the thumb and index finger. I thought, "Hmm, he's a very clean-sounding player." When you're holding the bow like that you can't play down at the frog very well, but at the tip and in the middle you can do pretty well. The way I play I attack the notes — I try to get a good crisp attack at the beginning of the note. Trying that [bow hold], you can't get any other kind of sound; it's a crisp attack at the beginning of each note.

*When you play, do you normally have your little finger on the bow?*

Sometimes, yes, it depends. Sometimes I do, and when I'm not thinking about it I don't much. I'm trying to control it better, and I've discovered that when I do put my little finger on there I can control it a little bit better at both ends; I feel like I have more control over the whole length of the bow. I'm trying to work that into my teaching...after playing with just the thumb and index finger, maybe adding one finger at a time.

The other thing is wrist action. The other day I had to come up with something quick and creative to show a seven-year-old beginner what to do with her bow hand. I decided we could take something and lay it on the back of her right hand and give it a "ride on an elevator" up and down like that, and keep it perfectly perpendicular to the floor. 'Cause that's really what you do with your bow hand, right? That's the motion I use when I'm doing a long bow.

One piece of advice I tell people about bowing...when you're watching someone good play, the bow is doing this stuff and the hand is kind of following along for the ride. So it's the bow doing the motions, and your hand figures out how to do it somehow. So I say, don't think too much about the mechanics of what you're doing with your hand to make the bow do that. But visualize what you want the bow to do. Or what you want it to sound like. I don't know, I've never really had lessons, so this is the way I've learned things — watching people. Listening and watching both, those are big ways that I learn things.

*"...Those old jigs and reels I think are kind of like sacred ground and I don't like to mess with them much melodically. So I have a rather conservative approach to playing."*

*When you're teaching someone a tune, do you teach them a specific bowing pattern?*

No. They seem to want one, but I can't do it because I don't bow it the same twice. I try to teach people to be creative, to think and be flexible. The one thing I do kind of insist on, when there's a bunch of short notes in a row, that you go DOWN-up-DOWN-up-DOWN-up, instead of UP-down-UP-down-UP-down. Because going DOWN-up, you can make the down a little longer than the up, you know? That swifty thing, making the down bow a little longer than the up bow.

*Do you feel like when you play, you pretty much have that swing any time you're doing a reel?*

Yeah, hopefully. I want to. Sometimes when I'm tired, and just kind of cranking it out without too much energy, I catch myself and realize, "Oh, wait a minute, this doesn't have enough swing, does it; I'm just kind of playing the notes." It takes a lot of adrenaline to play the fiddle.

*How about left hand ideas?*

Listen to yourself carefully. I kind of figured out a way to teach myself to play in tune, by using double stops. Start off with a double stop that involves an open string — put your first finger down and make sure it's exactly a fourth below the open string above it, or your third finger exactly an octave above the string below. Then build on from there. Leave that finger down in just exactly the right place, then add another one and play *that* double stop. As many doublestops as you can think of, and listen to it microscopically to make sure they're really, really, in tune. The doublestops are just like a real cross-check.

I try to remember to tell people when they're using their electronic tuner, listen real closely to what it sounds like when you're doing it. Don't just go by the lights, listen carefully and memorize what the intervals sound like. Otherwise you're not learning anything and you're becoming hooked on the tuner.

*Is most of the playing you do these days for dances?*

No. A lot of it is. But — I have a little regular Sunday brunch gig that I do — and I do singing stuff, too, and banjo and guitar.

*Do you play differently when you're playing for dances than with a concert group?*

Sometimes I do, because I play different tunes. I don't play all that many of the same dance tunes for concerts. For dances, I experiment, I'm not as careful — which is fun. When I'm in a concert, I have to sometimes remind myself to be a little more careful

because I can end up out on a limb [laughs].

I guess my philosophy about improvising on dance tunes, like jigs and reels...some people kind of like to change them into swing tunes, you know you get that impression hearing some of the modern dance players? Sometimes I guess I get fooling around and do a melodic improvisation, sort of tongue in cheek. I don't do it seriously, because I really don't believe in it. You can kind of improvise on the rhythm, on where you accent and ornament tunes, and maybe tiny little melodic changes, it can be a little different each time. But it's got to be recognizable as the same tune. I want to keep it so it's obviously the tune it was intended to be.

I notice the Cape Breton players, each different one you hear playing the same tune will have their own little signature on it, they'll have two or three notes that they play differently than somebody else. I think little things like that are okay, but those old jigs and reels I think are kind of like sacred ground and I don't like to mess with them much melodically. So I have a rather conservative approach to playing.

*Do you have any fiddle goals or dreams that you're pointed towards at the moment?*

Well, yeah, to play as fluently and as well as possible. I've been working on higher positions. I've never done a whole lot above first position. My goals are to be less rough around the edges, to be more polished. But not less energetic. I think the ferociousness, or whatever you'd like to call it, that I play with is important.

*I certainly think of it as one of your trademarks.*

That's what I hear from other people, that's what I hear that people like about my playing. Playing with soul, that's a big thing. Putting your soul into it. It's important.

I guess I should give you some sage advice. It's very simple. People ask what they should do to learn how to play the fiddle. Just listen, and listen, and listen. Listen to as much fiddle music as you can and find out what you like. That's what I try to remember to tell students. You can't learn it from paper. The notes, the music is like a road map, and hearing someone play it is like driving down the road watching the scenery. ♪

*For lessons, bookings, or information about his recordings, contact George Wilson at 10 Loomis Road, Wynantskill, NY 12198, (518) 283-4957.*

*[Susan Conger lives in western Massachusetts, where she teaches fiddle, plays for contra and Swedish dances, and writes tunes. She has recorded with the bands Three Good Reasons and Spare Parts.]*

# Forever Young Waltz

Composed by George Wilson for the 90th birthday of Alice Davidson, ©1996. Not yet recorded.

1 G D C G E7

8 A7 D G B7 C G

15 D 1.G 2.G B7 Em

23 A7 D G Bm

30 C G D 1.G 2.G

*"The notes, the music, is like a road map, and hearing someone play it is like driving down the road watching the scenery."*

## About His Instrument

*Do you still play on the violin that was the old violin up in the attic?*

No, that hasn't been usable in a long time. You know, I had to put it together a bunch, and I didn't know much about that back then, so it's basically trashed. The fiddle that I play on is one that I lucked onto maybe in about 1975 or so. I got a good deal on it because I needed to fix it up, and I did. I put a new neck on it. The label says "The Excelsior Violin. Made in Germany. Inside construction by August Gemunder & Sons, New York." It's nice, I like it a lot.

*Do you have a sense of how old it is?*

Probably 1920s.

*Did you get the bow with it?*

No, the bow that I'm using now is one that I got from somebody at the airport. [George is also a pilot.] She had a fiddle and bow that were her grandfather's, and she wanted me to fix them up. The bow had a French name on it and I thought, "Hmm, this might be a neat bow." So I did some work on the fiddle and got the bow in trade. I still have to get a better bow.

## Discography

George Wilson, *Northern Melodies*, 1995

The Whipper Snappers, *Gettin' Happy*, 1988  
(George Wilson, Peter Davis, Frank Orsini)

George Wilson & Selma Kaplan, *Off With the Good Saint Nicholas Boat*, 1985

*New England Chestnuts 2*, Alcazar FR 204, 1981

*New England Chestnuts*, Alcazar FR 203, 1980

(Rodney & Randy Miller; George Wilson plays mostly bass, but some fiddle and banjo)

Fennig's All Star String Band (George Wilson, Toby Stover)

*The Hammered Dulcimer Returns*, Front Hall, FHR 041, 1992

*Fennigmania*, Front Hall, FHR-024, 1981

*The Hammered Dulcimer Strikes Again*, Front Hall, FHR-010, 1977

Ebenezer, *Tell It To Me*, Biograph RC-6007, 1976  
(Allan Block, George Wilson, Nancy McDowell)