

John Hartford: A "Fun and Open Discussion"

By Peter Anick

Many of us "baby boomers" remember John Hartford's appearances on the Glen Campbell TV show in the mid-sixties. The deep-voiced composer of "Gentle on My Mind" went on to become a fixture in the folk scene, combining his prolific songwriting, instrumental virtuosity and indefatigable footwork into a one-of-a-kind one man show that cheerfully bridged the gap between old and new. This past summer, as John was finishing up a songwriting workshop at the Winterhawk Bluegrass Festival, I asked him if he would share some thoughts about writing fiddle tunes. He suggested that we actually try composing a tune and we retired to his bus to do just that. In this interview, John intersperses his composing with his insights on a whole range of fiddlistic topics.

How would you compare writing a song to writing a fiddle tune?

Well, writing a fiddle tune is just writing a melody, and there are songs that are fiddle tunes, or of course you can play any song as a fiddle tune, I guess. About the same kinds of things apply. I jot 'em down as they come into my head. A lot of times, I wake up in the morning, I got something on my mind, or I can just start writing, put something down and see what comes out.

Do you have a particular goal in mind when you write a fiddle tune?

I guess I'm always trying to write "the fiddle tune," "the melody." And I don't want it to be too complicated. I just want it to be something that's memorable. The whole study of fiddle tunes and melodies and everything really probably boils down to why you like one melody over another, which is of course the 64 dollar question.

Any guesses?

No. That's the one I don't understand. Sometimes I'll be working on a melody and say, "There's no way anybody could like this." I'll change one note in it or something, and then I'll fall in love with it. Or I'll think, "Oh this is the greatest melody I ever heard," and then I'll go to play it and it won't be worth a dime...

Do you find it harder to come up with a second part than a first part?

No... [Picks up his pen] let's just write a tune here. This part of it I don't understand. It's just like I turn a switch and let's just see where it goes. [Hums and writes. Rearranges the bar lines.] That seems to be a pickup there, which just makes it even more interesting... [Hums it again.] What's the date today? I always date everything. Let's call this "Fiddler Magazine." That's a good title for it. I always give everything a title if I possibly can — just give it



Photo: Peter Anick

something to hang it on. [Picks up his fiddle] All right, here's the first part. [Plays]



Why that's only six bars! That even makes it more interesting. [Plays it again] Yeah, I like that. Let's just make up a bridge. [Hums and writes] I've got enough of this in my head that it'll kinda echo... [Hums] This will kinda pull you back into that first part but it will also make us want to put a third part to it. Now this might be a little hard to play, but I'm not going to censor myself right now on that. [Plays what he has written.]



Now you can write that all out in 16ths like that and make a tune where if you make a little mistake or something like that, it becomes something else or you have a train wreck. A lot of times I try to write tunes in a real simple style and not use as many 16ths unless I just absolutely need it to describe the contour of the melody... so that it gives me more ad libbing room. But a lot of times...after I've played it for a while and kind of get the gist of

what it is, I can go back and rewrite it like that and give myself plenty of ad libbing room. And a lot of times what I'll do is, if I start liking a tune like that, playing with it, I'll kind of get it under my fingers and play it for a while away from the paper until it starts to make sense to me. And then I'll sit back down and rewrite from memory. 'Cause I think a lot of these old tunes have been polished and repolished by countless people playing them and the good notes and the good runs survive and the ones that aren't so good....

Kind of an evolutionary selection. Listening to that tune, the first part has got a nice flow to it. It caught me by surprise that it was only six measures.

Yeah, I never know. I've had several tunes come out where the measures were weird but they made sense and when I tried to add measures to it, they didn't, so I just leave 'em in there. [Plays it over several times.] Now just for kicks... [Writes] Now let's just reduce that down. [Plays it simplified, then fills in the holes with some ad libs, makes some changes.] There, that kind of ties it in — makes it kinda rhyme. 'Cause sometimes phrases almost need to rhyme. Now, as I play that, I could be smoothing it out. [Plays.]

What did you do before you learned to write music? Did you use a tape recorder?

Yeah, I did it all in my head, and it was terrible because I can just sit and make up tunes all day long and if I don't catch 'em on tape, I don't remember 'em. And then, if I want to learn 'em, I got to listen to the tape times and times. So it was a lot harder. [Improvises a little] You could get that and write it out and straighten it up, add and subtract, probably make a nice little tune out of that. I don't know how that part works. Since I was a little kid...

When did you first start playing the fiddle?

Five, six years old... My grandfather had [a fiddle] out at his house, and I used to sneak it out, play on it. And I was sawing around pretty good on it before anybody knew I was doing it. I did it in secret.

Your grandfather played old-time fiddle?

No, I never heard him play. I think he played mostly church music on it. I never heard him play but he had it, and I was strictly told to leave it alone. And I used to sneak it out from under the coats in the back of the closet when nobody was around. I started playing with the fiddle laying in the case like this, and I'd get the bow out. And then I got where I'd do like this — I didn't know how to tune, but I could [plays].

Did you have tunes that you wanted to play on it at that point?

Yeah, I did. My mom and dad used to go square dancing and the tunes that they danced to were all in my head, so I knew what the music sounded like.

So they'd take you when they went square dancing?

Yeah, rather than get a baby sitter. Well, the kind of

square dances where everybody else took their kids, too, and while they'd be dancing, why the kids would be running wild like little Indians.

And you'd be watching the fiddler?

Yeah, coupla times they would dance to records but mostly it was a live fiddler. Used to be an old one-armed fiddler named Jess Arthur, had a fiddle bow attached to the end of his arm. And then there was an old fiddler named Dr. Gray — he was a dentist.

So that's what got you into it?

I think so. Well, I think what got me into it was that I loved music and that I was Scotch-Irish descent. Now, this tune here... [plays the tune he's just written], now we can make up a bridge to that right away or we can sit and play it for a while and see if there's a natural bridge. [Plays it with several possible B-parts.]

How many tunes do you think you've written in your life?

I don't know. This is Book 66.

And each book contains hundreds of tunes?

Thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, well maybe a hundred...

How do you decide on the names?

Just whatever first thing comes into my head. But also, I collect a lot of old tunes and I also write 'em out in these books, too, and whatever I need that I want to work on, stuff like that, I Xerox it out and have it on paper. This is just a master list, and then I have a way of cataloging. If I say, why, a certain tune is somewhere, it'll be in B66 P23 or something, that means it's book 66, page 23.



John Hartford in the process of composing his tune "Fiddler Magazine" at the 1996 Winterhawk Bluegrass Festival.

Do you remember all the tunes that you've written?

No, no, lord no! If they're good tunes and stick with me, yeah, then I remember them. I remember a lot of tunes that I wrote, but I certainly don't remember everything, and not everything I write would be worth remembering...

Who would you say were the main influences on your fiddling?

Well, I'd have to say Gene Goforth, Benny Martin, Ed Haley, Dr. Jimmy Gray, Texas Shorty, Benny Thomasson, Major Franklin.

Quite a range of influences. I couldn't help but notice all the variations and different bowings you put into "Billy in the Lowground" yesterday.

That seems to be something that I can't avoid. I'm a chronic improviser.

When you play something like that, how much is pre-arranged and how much is on the spot?

It's all off the top of my head. If I sat down and played it for you right now, it would just come out different... You've got to be able to improvise in the language of fiddle tunes. I mean, you can't start playing bebop scales and things like that. Although I've been experimenting with a thing I really enjoy, where you start, you leave the first 16th note out as a rest, and then start. Or, instead, if you don't want to confuse anybody, you just play something there and then you start your thought process in one 16th, or two 16ths. [Demonstrates on "Billy in the Lowground."] You do the same tune, everything right in place, you just put your phrase endings in funny places. I guess, to do a tune like that, improvise on it, you've got to have a pretty good handle on it. I've got tunes that I can play note for note, but, if I relax myself, I'll usually start fussin' with it.

What do you consider the "language" of fiddle tunes?

Boy, that'd be real hard to say! It's like Clifford Hawthorne — an old boy I grew up with — he used to say, "I may not be the best fiddler you ever heard, but, by God, I can tell when one's a bein' played!" I don't know how to tell you that. I can just listen to one and tell whether it's in the ballpark or not. Benny Thomasson and Mark O'Connor are wonderful improvisors, and it's all in the fiddle tune language. The improvs almost sound like they were engraved in stone.

Another good exercise that I really love to do is take a tune that doesn't have a whole lot of parts and just start making up parts as you go, just playing it as if it had a whole bunch of parts... I think the one thing that helps in improvising is always try to play in time, even when you're working something out, try to keep it going and try to keep it in time. Don't stop and noodle it out, or do that as little as possible, because then if you don't hit something, something else will come out. It'll be okay. And then the next time around, you can go for the thing again, and if it doesn't work, you've got something else.

How'd you decide you were going to become a professional musician?

I didn't decide. It just kinda took me over. I was originally going to be a riverboat pilot and music was my second choice, and it just wouldn't let me alone. It tortures me by not allowing me to be quite as good as I want to be. My lifelong quest now is trying to teach my body how to reproduce what I hear in my head.

How much time do you devote to writing songs versus writing tunes?

I can't answer that because sometimes the tunes become songs. And I'm very fascinated by the fact that I can mix it all up. I think one of the last frontiers of music is the ad libbing of lyrics, 'cause

"I was originally going to be a riverboat pilot and music was my second choice, and it just wouldn't let me alone."



Mike Compton, John Hartford, and Roy Huskey, Jr.

Photo: David Schenk

you see lyrics and speech come out of different sides of the brain. That's why if you sit around with somebody and sing-talk...

[Sings]

If you sit around and carry on a conversation
Like this and make all of your conversation in tune
Unless you practice it day to day
Or do whatever it's real hard to keep it goin'
Because after a while you start getting absent minded
And then you get off the subject
And you can't remember what it is you're gonna say...

And the other way to express that is to play the melody of speech, which is non melody [Plays some sentences on the violin, mimicking the spoken intonation]...

I've done all kinds of things like write [tunes] upside down and see if I can make heads or tails of 'em or write 'em without any time and then go back and do it or take another melody and write it every other note — just crazy stuff, just to see what kind of a direction I can pull myself in if I can get some kind of a start and then take off and see where it's gonna take me.

Has that helped?

Yeah, it's been fun. Most of the best melodies are things I wake up in the morning with. I'll wake up and the whole tune'll be in my head. It's just a matter of writing it down.

If you get distracted, then, do you lose it?

Yeah, or if somebody turns on a radio or starts playing an instrument and gets another tune going, it'll wipe it out, yeah. That's suicide to do that around me in the morning! If I come down and I've got that blank look in my face and somebody turns the radio on, boy, they're usually in for some trouble!

How do you know when a tune is done?

I don't think a tune is ever done. You keep playing on it and working on it. "Billy in the Low Ground" must not be done, if I can stand up there and improvise on it. Theoretically, I guess it is done — it's an ironclad tune also, though. It's a tune that anybody can get a hold of and play and you always just about know what it is. Those are the kind of tunes I'd like to be able to write. "Sally Goodin" is a great ironclad fiddle tune. "Old Joe Clark." Those standard old fiddle tunes...

Have you done some historical research on tracking tunes back?

I sure have. Well, I read through these old tune books and every time I find a tune that sounds like something else, I try to figure out what it is and then I make a notation on a 3X5 card and drop it in the card file. I love the fiddle tunes of the Big Sandy River Valley [between Kentucky and West Virginia] and I like the tunes from back home in Missouri, and I like the stuff in Texas and when I hear one, I try to figure out where it's from and what it's like...The study of fiddle tunes is a whole lot like studying words. If you read the Oxford dictionary and it starts talking about the history of words, it talks about it in terms of where was the first time this

A New Video from Fiddler Magazine

Ralph Blizzard

Master of the Appalachian
Long-Bow Fiddle Style
with the
New Southern Ramblers



East Tennessee fiddler Ralph Blizzard has played to enthusiastic audiences all over the country — at the Smithsonian, the Library of Congress, Wolf Trap, Augusta, the Museum of Appalachia, the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes, and dozens more venues. An ambassador of old-time fiddling, Ralph is eager to share his wonderful gift. Beginning with a radio career at age fourteen, Ralph's long-bow fiddling is as smooth and beautiful as ever. On this video, Ralph is accompanied by his band the New Southern Ramblers (Gordy Hinner on banjo, Phil Jamison on guitar, and John Herrmann on bass). Join these great musicians for an hour of old-time music, brief interviews with Ralph, and a little dancing. The tunes include Hell Among the Yearlings, Dixon County Blues, Chitlin Cookin' Time in Cheatham County, Gypsy Stomp, Sugar Tree Stomp, Turkey in the Straw, Leather Britches, Paddy on the Turnpike, Smith Waltz, Midnight on the Water, Lost Indian, and several more. \$25 plus postage. Please see page 57 to order.

word was published, or where was the first time that we heard this word...So I kinda put that to fiddle tunes, too...

Do you think there's a difference between tunes that came over from the British Isles and tunes that were written here?

Yeah. The British Isles stuff is mostly real dotted. But I feel very confident that the old time fiddling even in the Big Sandy River Valley and in Missouri in the vintage of the War Between the States was probably sounding a lot more Celtic than what we're used to. I think we've had a lot of ragtime and black influence that's made it sound like what we hear today, which I dearly love. Or it also may be that what we're hearing might be a lot closer to the way it was originally and that it didn't change here and it changed back there. It was one of the two. [Plays "Paddy on the Turnpike" with a dotted feel.] Now, if you take that lilt, that dotted note feel, and just swing it just a hair, then you're pretty close to what Ed Haley's doing.

So he kind of bridges the gap.

Yeah... Count Basie's playing with a lilt.

Do you know much about how waltzes got into old time fiddling?

I think the waltz is the German influence. Most of this country got settled with Scotch-Irish and German. My background is Scotch-Irish, with a little bit of German and a tiny little bit of French and a little bit of English. Here Scotch-Irish is the main channel, and the tributaries are the German, and Afro, and Scandinavian. The river of music comes down through Shetland Islands and down through Scotland and then down through Ireland and then over to this country, and all up and down the east coast, and then into Pennsylvania and down into the Appalachians and down through the Ohio River Valley and up the Mississippi and down the Mississippi and out the Missouri and then just swinging out through Texas. It's a whole river of Celtic music...