

Fiddle tunes of the old frontier

Alan Jabbour

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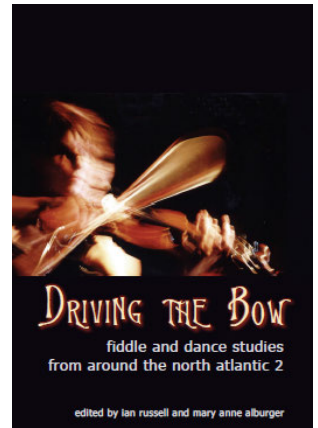
Driving the Bow

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 2

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About the author:

Alan Jabbour began documenting old-time fiddlers in the Upper South while a graduate student at Duke University in the 1960s. Documentation turned into apprenticeship, and he learned the fiddle. After receiving his PhD in 1968, he taught at UCLA and then moved to Washington D. C., where he later became Director of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, 1976–1999. He has published widely on topics related to folk music, folklore, and cultural policy.

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Fiddle tunes of the old frontier

ALAN JABBOUR

Professor Holger Nygard's ballad seminar at Duke University in 1963¹ inspired me to launch a project two years later to document and study traditional fiddling in the American Upper South (North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Kentucky, and West Virginia). Over several years I made field recordings of older traditional fiddlers, transcribed their tunes and bowing patterns, and poured over comparative data in the form of manuscripts, print publications, and published and archival sound recordings from the United States and the British Isles. I had been trained classically on the violin as a youth, so I not only collected recordings but also apprenticed myself with my new masters. In short, I became both a student of fiddling and a fiddler.

My original quest was to document the fiddling of the Upper South, and in my comparative studies I sought to uncover the history and derivation of the tradition I encountered. The region of my work stretched from the North Carolina Piedmont westward and north-westward into the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina and Virginia, the Alleghany Mountains of western Virginia, and the Alleghany Plateau of West Virginia. Within this larger region I found many tunes and tune forms that could also be encountered in the northern United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Ireland. But I also encountered a large and vigorous repertory that seemed to be born in and confined to the region where I was working, as well as an array of stylistic elements that seemed distinctive. The distinctive repertory and style suggested what I might have guessed anyway: that the Upper South is a distinctive cultural region in the world of fiddling. This repertory and style seemed concentrated in the Piedmont and Appalachian regions of North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia, as well as the trans-Appalachian West. I came to think of it as associated with the old frontier of westward expansion in the Upper South of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century, hence the title of this essay, 'Fiddle Tunes of the Old Frontier'.²

Originally my mental model to explain the history of the fiddling I encountered was much like most people's model. I assumed that fiddling originated in the British Isles and was brought to what is now the United States in the eighteenth century.

The repertory, I presumed, was imported from the Old World – though, of course, additions to the repertory were composed later in America. The style, likewise, was British and Irish, though doubtless there were later stylistic developments that bore the American brand. Essentially, I viewed the fiddling I was recording from older Southern fiddlers in the 1960s as a lineal descendant from British originals – as echoes of the Old World with a lively admixture from the New.

In time, as I documented the fiddling from the Upper South more broadly and immersed myself extensively in early publications and manuscripts of fiddle tunes, my mental model began to change. The ideas with which I had begun my quest no longer seemed adequate to explain the evidence, and a new cultural model began to emerge in my mind that better explained what I had encountered. This paper is an account of that new model. Perhaps I can explain it best by listing a series of points where the original model and the evidence were at odds with each other.

1. Dating of repertoire

I had imagined that the instrumental music tradition I was exploring dated back at least to the seventeenth century in the British Isles. But the body of evidence seemed to stretch back only to the last half of eighteenth century, at which point there was a kind of cultural curtain. Beyond the curtain, instrumental folk music seemed different. To be sure, there were a few gossamer threads that dated from before the curtain – a few tunes, like ‘Greensleeves,’ that survived from the Renaissance into the modern era. But, by and large, the tunes from before the mid-eighteenth century had a different character from the tunes after that point, and hardly any of the tunes from that earlier era survived in modern tradition. By contrast, any number of tunes from the late eighteenth century are still played today – tunes like ‘Soldier’s Joy,’ ‘Fisher’s Hornpipe,’ ‘McLeod’s Reel,’ and ‘Lord McDonald’s Reel,’ that have not only survived but can be described as the very backbone of the latter-day fiddle repertory.³

The late eighteenth century turned out to be a revolutionary period for instrumental folk music, as it was revolutionary for so many other elements in our civilization. The new style of instrumental music that emerged included 6/8-time jigs and 4/4-time reels that accompanied group dances, and also a new class of 4/4-time tunes called ‘hornpipes’ that accompanied solo ‘fancy’ or exhibition step dances.⁴ A typical tune had two parts or ‘strains,’ each of which was repeated.

The favoured instrument for this music revolution was the modern Italian-style violin, which had spread northward through Europe in the seventeenth century.⁵ In the eighteenth century, a number of manufactories for making violins sprang up in Germany, France, and England,⁶ and they had the effect of democratizing the violin, making it available not just to professional or guild musicians but to people from all walks of life. So I am inclined to attribute the revolution in instrumental music to the advent of the modern violin, as a widely diffused new instrument, combined with the general revolutionary spirit of the later eighteenth century in the British Isles and colonies.

2. Fiddle traditions

I had originally imagined that fiddle music was first developed in the British Isles, and then exported to the New World. Thus we could think of the British tradition as an ancestor of the American tradition, just as the American ballad tradition derived from British balladry. But once I realized that the modern instrumental tradition dated from the last half of the eighteenth century, rather than earlier, I had to acknowledge that all the modern regional styles of instrumental music in the English-speaking world seemed with one or two exceptions to date back to the same period.⁷ This included not only the English, Scottish, and Irish traditions, but the New World traditions as well. American tune collections in published or manuscript form date from as early as the late eighteenth century – hardly later than the British written record.⁸ Indeed, some American instrumental tunes that can be dated as early as the end of the eighteenth century seem to have originated here in America. If there was any time lag at all between the Old World and New World flowering of this new class of fiddle tunes, it was surely no more than a generation. And though the cultural flow at first seemed to be primarily from Europe to the New World, one has to acknowledge simultaneity in the timing, as if every region of the English-speaking world within a generation embraced the same instrumental music revolution.

But each region came up with its own version of the revolution, containing its own special repertory and its own performance style. In effect, the revolution was pan-regional, but at the same time it was regionally branded. The Scottish version of the revolution led to what we now think of as the Golden Age – the period associated with the classic Scottish instrumental repertory and style. The Irish version likewise had its own tunes and styles, and the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions had their distinctive features. Rather than seeming like ancestors and descendants, these various regional traditions came to seem more like cultural cousins – differing among themselves, but all related and all born of the same generation.

The tradition of the Upper South, which had been the original object of my focus, seemed at first to present a slightly different case. In the Northern states there were always some fiddlers who could read music, but fiddlers in the Southern states were rarely music-readers. Thus the print and manuscript record was absent for most of the nineteenth century, except for publications from the minstrel stage, which contained a hard-to-sort-out mixture of Southern folk music and new popular compositions. But then I discovered a collection of tunes entitled *Virginia Reels*, published in Baltimore in 1839, before the rise in popularity of the minstrel stage.⁹ The collection was assembled by George P. Knauff, who was then serving as a music master and proprietor of a 'Music and Fancy Store' in Prince Edward County, Virginia. Knauff clearly did not compose the tunes; rather, he compiled the collection by transcribing local fiddle tunes and adding a simple left-hand accompaniment. His young lady students on piano could thus practice piano using tunes they might already have heard locally. A good half of the tunes in this 1839 publication from Southside Virginia are tunes I recorded from older fiddlers well over a century later.

A few are of British origin or have Northern analogues, but the many tunes and titles of purely Virginia vintage suggest that there was a well established fiddle tradition in the Upper South, with its own characteristic repertory and tune contours, by the early nineteenth century. Thus I came to believe that the Upper South, too, was one of the cultural cousins of the instrumental music revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

3. Bowing style

I had supposed that the repertory and style in the Upper South were originally British, and then by new composition and gradual stylistic evolution became more regionally distinctive. But as the other elements of my original model were eroded, I began to contemplate the possibility that the Southern fiddling style I was documenting in the twentieth century took shape much earlier than I had originally imagined. In particular, I reflected on the bowing patterns I had been laboriously transcribing from my fiddling mentors. Many of them used bowing patterns in which were embedded elaborate forms of syncopation. Now it should be stipulated that syncopation has many forms. Any performance that establishes one rhythmic pattern, and then superimposes a different pattern in contradistinction to the original pattern, is using syncopation. But the syncopated bowing patterns of my fiddling mentors were precisely what we all think of as 'American syncopation,' appearing in jazz and popular music and commonly presumed to be an African-American contribution to our musical heritage.

This particular syncopated pattern – the grouping of eight fast notes in a dance tune into subgroups of 3-3-2 – is the classic syncopation of American popular music. Most people assume it came from jazz, or perhaps from blues or even ragtime. But these forms are all products of the earlier twentieth century. When did the fiddlers of the Upper South begin doing these syncopated patterns? And where did they get the idea? Is it an African-American contribution?¹⁰

We can begin answering this puzzle by noting that the bowing pattern I just described occurs widely throughout the American South. What is more, it occurs in the oldest field recordings from widely separated areas of the South. My mentor Henry Reed was born in 1884 in Monroe County, West Virginia, and learned his fiddling style before the turn of the century from old men in his local area. He used this syncopated pattern constantly – so much that it can be described as embedded in his fundamental style. It is not an added feature or an ornament, but a basic feature of his playing. One might say that he could not avoid using it.¹¹ Studying early commercial and field recordings, one can find the identical pattern in the playing of older fiddlers from Virginia to Texas whose style took shape before the advent of commercial recordings and radio.¹² Such a broad distribution of this syncopated pattern among fiddlers who learned their art before the turn of the century can best be accounted for by supposing that the pattern spread westward with the settlement of the trans-Appalachian West during the nineteenth century.

Looking beyond the region to compare this pattern with the bowing patterns of other regional cousins, we find that Northern American fiddling styles only rarely use this bowing pattern—though in places that reflect overlapping cultural regions, one might find a trace of it. Nor is it a central feature of any of the British regional styles, though one can find it as a stylistic variant in Irish fiddling.¹³ Only in the Upper South is it a hallmark of the regional style—a cultural indicator so constant and predictable that it could be used as a sort of cultural shibboleth.

Casting our net even wider, we may encounter the same precise syncopated pattern from Africa and the Mediterranean to musical styles as far away as India. But it seems likely that it came to be prominent in the fiddling of the Upper South through African-American influence. If one examines the historical record from the Upper South more closely, it becomes clear that the fiddle in places like Virginia was the favourite instrument of Black as well as White instrumentalists in the later eighteenth century and the pre-Civil War nineteenth century.¹⁴ One comparative study by banjo scholar Robert Winans of runaway slave advertisements, 'Black Musicians in Eighteenth-Century America: Evidence from Runaway Slave Advertisements',¹⁵ notes that the musical instrument mentioned far more often than any other instrument in describing the capabilities of runaway slaves was the fiddle. (The fife is a distant second, and the Africa-derived banjo and the flute are roughly tied for third.) The Winans study covers advertisements from throughout early America, but its results doubtless reflect the situation in the Upper South. Fiddle and banjo continued to be central to the African-American tradition of the Upper South till the end of the nineteenth century, when piano and guitar began to replace fiddle and banjo as the most favoured African-American instruments.

So we know that whites and blacks were playing the fiddle widely in the Upper South during the period of the Early Republic. In fact, they were playing it in comparable numbers, and we also know from historical accounts that they were frequently playing it together or in each other's presence. It was a revolutionary period, and the evidence seems to me compelling that African-American fiddlers simply added this signature syncopation to the bowing patterns on the fiddle.



Figure 1 Henry Reed, c.1967

Photograph by Karen Singer Jabbour

White fiddlers quickly embraced it, and it quickly moved from being an ethnic innovation to being a regional standard. The pattern could have been present as an abstract pattern in African tradition, and also (though more recessively) in European tradition.

Once it had become a regional hallmark, shared by black and white fiddlers, it spread in three ways. First, it spread directly through western migration – to a degree by blacks but, more importantly, by whites, who had incorporated the syncopated bowing patterns into their own playing and cultural values. Second, it spread into wider popular consciousness through the minstrel stage of the nineteenth century. And third, African-American musicians transferred the same patterns to other instruments, such as the guitar and piano, thus reintroducing the patterns in all the successive waves of folk-rooted popular music, including ragtime, blues, and jazz in the twentieth century. By the mid-twentieth century it had become a general American pattern of syncopation, and by the later twentieth century all the world would recognize the pattern as a stylistic hallmark of American music.

4. 'Strains'

The African-American contribution is a profound part of the regional culture of the Upper South. But there is a hint of another cultural contribution that warrants our attention as well. To explain this point I will need to return to a description of the features of a typical fiddle tune in the English-speaking world.

A typical fiddle tune has two parts or sections – we may call them 'strains'. Each strain typically has sixteen beats – or steps, if one is dancing. The typical tune performance calls for the fiddler to repeat each strain once before going on to the other strain. I hope the reader will forgive my repeated cautionary use of the word 'typical'. Fiddling tradition, especially in the Upper South, allows for considerable latitude in these matters, so some tunes may contain three or four parts, and some of the strains are shortened or elongated from the norm. But to summarize, a performance of a tune from beginning to end will typically consume sixty-four beats. Many dance figures in squares, longways, and solo 'fancy' or exhibition step dances are timed in multiples to coincide with the tune's progress from phrase to phrase and strain to strain.

When a tune consists of two strains, there is a sort of musical calculus dictating that one of the strains should be in a lower-pitched range, and the other in a higher-pitched range. For most of the musical regions of the English-speaking world, the first strain typically is the low strain, and the second strain is the high strain. Furthermore, though ideally one might imagine that both parts of a tune are equally distinctive, in practice the lower strain tends to be the more distinctive strain, while the high strain is more likely to be a bit like a 'filler' or a variation.

It is not unknown in Ireland, Scotland, Canada, or the Northern United States to have a tune beginning on the high strain. But it is unusual and uncharacteristic. There is in fact only one musical region of the English-speaking world where a large class of fiddle tunes inverts the usual pattern. In the Upper South thousands

of fiddle tunes begin on the high strain and then continue to the low strain. What is more, the high strain is typically the more musically characteristic and important strain—the strain that identifies the tune. The low strain is more likely to be the ‘filler’. And the contour of the high strain is often a descending contour, giving the whole tune a feeling of descent rather than ascent. A number of these descending tunes in the Appalachian repertory are named after creeks and rivers, and it is hard to resist making the metaphorical connection between the descending tune and the creeks and rivers of the Upper South.

This high-to-low tune contour seems to date from the same period as the syncopated pattern discussed above. Several tunes in Knauff’s 1839 Virginia Reels collection follow this contour, so it was clearly well established before the explosion of the minstrel stage in the 1840s, which enthusiastically incorporated it and elaborated upon it. The pattern drifted from the fiddle to the banjo, and simultaneously it appeared in many Upper South folksongs of a lively or playful nature. By the beginning of the twentieth century it was firmly established in the musical ethos of the South, appearing even in new instrumental genres like rags and blues. It did not crowd out the low-to-high pattern that predominates in all other regions, but simply coexisted with the other pattern as a vigorous alternative. But most new tunes in the Upper South during the nineteenth century followed this new native pattern for tune contour.

So where did this high-to-low preference in the tune contour come from? One is faced with the following logical choice: either they made it up, or they got it from somewhere. But though people on rare occasion invent radically new things never before encountered, more often they get their inspiration somewhere. So we must begin by considering the options for inspiring this musical idea. It exists in British, Northern European, and Northern American tradition – but only as an occasional alternative to the customary pattern. So it is hard to account for its sudden popularity in the nineteenth-century Upper South by referring to a few vagrant British originals. Nor does Africa provide a comfortable explanation – African music seems not to favour such tune contours, particularly in tunes with a wide range.¹⁶

There remains one other major cultural tradition that had an influence on the Upper South in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. We tend to picture American Indian traditions as isolated from the new emerging society of the Upper South in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. But the evidence suggests much more sustained cultural interaction in the early South than in the West later in the nineteenth century. There was extensive intermarriage in the South between American Indians and both whites and blacks. And although we are not used to thinking about American Indian influence in the musical realm, there are many examples of American Indian cultural influence on Southern life in other realms, such as foodways and material culture.

The fact is that American Indian music of the Eastern Woodlands and Plains favours a high-to-low descending tune contour. Today’s American Indian powwows are an excellent contemporary window into the same musical tradition, and one can

hear thousands of tunes that follow the same overall melodic contour as the Upper South fiddle tunes. It is worth reminding ourselves that modern powwow tunes are dance music, and they are often sung using vocables instead of words. In effect, they are tunes of a class and function comparable to the fiddle tunes of British-American tradition. We cannot prove this cultural influence on fiddling from the world of American Indian culture, and the evidence is more tenuous here than in the case of syncopation and African-American influence. But no other cultural influence is in sight that can account for those thousands of fiddle tunes of the Upper South that, in contradistinction to all other regions of the English-speaking world, start at the top of the tune and cascade down.

The concept of syncretism is useful to invoke at this point. When two cultures come into close contact, or one is superimposed on the other, syncretism is the cultural sorting process whereby cultural traits found in both cultures are selected for survival or heightened emphasis. We should remind ourselves that the trait of a descending musical contour and the trait of 3-3-2 syncopation exist in British tradition, though they are infrequent and recessive. So, one may imagine these examples to be cases of a syncretic marriage between a recessive musical trait in a dominant culture and a dominant musical trait in a recessive culture. If so, the marriages were fruitful, and the progeny number in the thousands today.

But our flights into the realm of genetic metaphor are still flights of fancy. It seems to me that such questions of cultural history, drawn from close interpretation of the folk art itself, should be the stock in trade of folklorists. But we have done far too little to pursue large cultural questions such as these. It is astonishing that cultural traits of such prominence and distinctiveness as these traits in the fiddle tunes of the Upper South have been utterly ignored by folklorists and ethnomusicologists. I will confess to oscillating – with both the syncopation story and the descending contour story – between the triumphal sense of having identified features of great cultural importance, and the anxious sense of being the only one in the world who thinks these connections are of any consequence.

Conclusion

Be that as it may, it is now time to summarize. The evidence I encountered in the old-time fiddle tunes of the Upper South, both through fieldwork and through comparative study of the extant manuscript and print record, led me gradually to modify my original assumptions. I now believe that the fiddle-tune repertoires and styles of the modern English-speaking world arose in the latter half of the eighteenth century. They constituted a revolution in instrumental folk music, and in the dances that instrumental folk music accompanies. The advent and democratization of the modern violin spurred the revolution, but the revolution also occurred during – and was probably stimulated by – a period of more widespread social and political revolution in both the British Isles and America.

The revolution occurred roughly simultaneously in all regions of the English-speaking world, so that the modern repertoires and styles might better be considered

cultural cousins than ancestors and descendants of each other, even if some of the cousins are from New World regions. But each region developed its version of the new revolution, tapping into regional and ethnic musical tastes and preferences. In the Upper South, the emergent style contained two salient features that seem to reflect the non-European ethnic components of the regional mix. Certain patterns of syncopation reflect African-American participation in the revolution, and a proclivity for starting tunes with the high strain and favouring a descending melodic contour may reflect a contribution of American Indian musical tastes. These elements developed early and were already part of the regional style when the minstrel stage began the long historical process of funnelling African-American and general Southern folk musical ideas into the larger vortex of American popular music. Thus our fiddle tunes of the old frontier may be tidy but compelling examples of the great New World synthesis of European, African, and American Indian cultural traditions into an emergent New World style.

I close this essay by invoking the American author Ralph Waldo Emerson. His 1837 Phi Beta Kappa lecture, entitled 'The American Scholar', called for a new revolutionary style and trumpeted: 'We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe'. As an alternative, Emerson counselled attention to the extraordinary buried within the ordinary:

The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride [...]. What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat [...] show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking [...] in these suburbs and extremities of nature.¹⁷

As he spoke, the fiddle tunes of the old frontier were forging a new style and a new meaning on the anvil of vernacular creativity. And although more time elapsed before folklore organized itself as a discipline, the pursuit of meaning through folklore answers well Emerson's challenge to the scholar to find 'the highest spiritual cause' in the art of ordinary people.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Holger Olof Nygard, *The Ballad of Heer Halewijn: Its Form and Variations in Western Europe* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1958).

² An earlier form of this essay was delivered as the Joseph Schick Lecture at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana, USA, 6 December 2001.

³ See, for example, 'Soldier's Joy', published in 1778 in James Aird, *A Selection of Scotch, English, Irish and Foreign Airs*, 6 vols (Glasgow: the compiler, [1778]), I, no. 109, cited in Samuel P. Bayard (ed.), *Dance to the Fiddle, March to the Fife: Instrumental Folk Tunes in Pennsylvania* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), p. 310.

⁴ See J. S. Bratton, 'Dancing a Hornpipe in Fetters', *Folk Music Journal*, 6 (1990), 65–82.

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⁵ W. Henry Hill, *Antonio Stradivari (1644–1737): His Life and Work* (New York: Dover Publications, 1963).

⁶ See Walter Kolneder, *The Amadeus Book of the Violin: Construction, History, and Music* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus, [1998]); and Brian W. Harvey, *The Violin Family and Its Makers in the British Isles: An Illustrated History and Directory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

⁷ There were exceptions. For example, London's Playford family published several Scottish tunes in John Playford, *Musicks Hand-maide* (London: Playford, 1663), in John Playford, *Apollo's Banquet*, 2nd edn (London: Playford, 1678), and in Henry Playford, *A Collection of Original Scotch Tunes, Full of Highland Humours, for the Violin* (London: Playford, 1700). I am grateful to Mary Anne Alburger for these references.

⁸ See, for example, 'Manuscript Collection of Dance Tunes [c. 1775–1800]', Newberry Library, Chicago; 'William O. Adams's Musick Book [1795]', Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁹ George P. Knauff, *Virginia Reels*, 4 vols (Baltimore: George Willig, Jr., c.1839). See Chris Goertzen and Alan Jabbour, 'George P. Knauff's Virginia Reels and Fiddling in the Antebellum South', *American Music*, 5, no. 2 (Summer 1987), 121–44.

¹⁰ There is a discussion of syncopation and cross-rhythms in relation to banjo tunes in the USA in Peter van der Merwe, *Origins of the Popular Style: The Antecedents of Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 162–70.

¹¹ See the multi-format ethnographic field collection *Fiddle Tunes of the Old Frontier: The Henry Reed Collection*, American Memory, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/reed/index.html> (accessed June 2008).

¹² See discography at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/reed/hrrel.html> (accessed June 2008).

¹³ See the paper by Eoghan Neff about the Donegal fiddler John Doherty in this volume.

¹⁴ Paul F. Wells, 'Fiddling as an Avenue of Black-White Musical Interchange', *Black Music Research Journal*, 23, no. 1/2 (2003), 135–47.

¹⁵ Presented at the 1985 meeting of the American Folklore Society. See Robert Winans, 'Black Instrumental Music Traditions in the Ex-slave Narratives', *Black Music Research Newsletter*, 5 (Spring 1982), 2–5.

¹⁶ Alan Jabbour, 'Cascading Tunes: On the Descending Contour in Appalachian Fiddle Tunes', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society, 16–20 October 2002, Rochester, New York. See http://www.alanjabbour.com/cascading_tunes.html (accessed June 2008).