



MISSOURI'S FINEST FIDDLERS

Howard Marshall, an expert in the traditional musical culture of Missouri, recently re-released a book and CDs tracing the history of old-time fiddling in the Show-Me State.

Story by Dale Smith * Photography by Nicholas Benner





Twenty years ago, Mizzou was under a national spotlight of sorts at, of all places, the Grammy Awards. In 1989, the university's now-defunct Cultural Heritage Center had put together a collection of 52 field recordings called *Now That's a Good Tune: Masters of Traditional Missouri Fiddling*.

THE ALBUM WAS A FINALIST in two categories but didn't win a Grammy. Nevertheless, the collection highlighting Missouri's finest fiddle players sold out quickly. It was out of print until 2008, when Voyager Recordings and Publications reissued both the recordings and the accompanying 97-page book by Howard Marshall, professor emeritus of art history. Other contributors to the book were Amy Skillman, Charlie Walden and Julie Youmans.

Marshall had (and still has) the academic chops to write the book and help pick the tunes, but his ability on the fiddle is remarkable as well. "Ever since my family moved to Randolph County in 1830, there's been a fiddler in every generation," says Marshall, BA '70. Now he is keeper of the flame. Just as it does in Marshall's family, traditional fiddling goes way back in Missouri. The instrument was common to countless settlers from Kentucky, Virginia, the Carolinas and other eastern states who flowed into the state during the pioneer era.

Over the past two centuries in Missouri, Marshall says, traditional fiddlers have played in four main venues: jam sessions, religious services, contests and dances. Jam sessions are informal gatherings during which musicians play together and swap tunes. These sessions are critical to passing along traditional music because inexperienced fiddlers can join in with the masters to learn tunes and techniques. "Sacred tunes are as much a part of the fid-



...dler's repertoire as hoedowns and waltzes," despite the fact that some religions consider it "the devil's instrument," Marshall says. Contest participants can gain attention for flashy renditions of hot tunes, but the pressures of this venue favor sizzle more than substantial songs that capture regional identity. Although contests claim press atten-



tion, old-time dances take place in Missouri most every weekend of the year. "Few house dances or 'kitchen sweats' are held these days, but dances remain important in the social and musical life of many communities in Missouri," Marshall says.

All in all, the violin is a versatile and occasionally volatile instrument. "It is a musical instrument welcome in the orchestra pit, the juke joint, the dance hall, parlor, kitchen and chapel," Marshall writes. "The

violin is, perhaps more than any other instrument, able to fire the emotions and to inculcate solemn repose." What's more, fiddling remains an important thread in Missouri life. "It's still there, if we just scratch the surface. Ninety percent of fiddlers are just people having fun around the kitchen table, and they don't care if anybody knows that they play."

Alan Jabbour, founding director of the American Folklife Center at the Library of

Congress in Washington, D.C., wrote the foreword to the first edition of Marshall's book. He described Missouri as an essence of America when it comes to fiddling. "As for me," he wrote, "having spent some happy days and nights in the midst of Missouri fiddlers, I rest easy knowing that, if fiddling ever ebbs in other parts of America, Missouri will hold fast till the tide turns again." ■

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Clockwise from top left: On the second Saturday of each month, local fiddlers and dancers gather at the Hallsville (Mo.) Community Center for a potluck dinner, followed by traditional music and dance. • Guitar accompanist Kenny Applebee plays at the Hallsville fiddle and dance gathering. • Richard Shewmaker, a student of Howard Marshall, warms up for the annual Boonville, Mo., fiddle contest, held at the Laura Speed Elliot School.



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