

A Musical Analysis of Developments in Texas Contest-Style Fiddling

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There is a stylistic evolution found through generations of Texas Contest Style fiddle performances in regard to innovative fiddle players who performed in idiosyncratic styles. However, the term ‘Texas Contest Style’ oversimplifies subtler distinctions between these individuals and the generations of players they influenced. Style characteristics in the tradition include elaborate technical maneuvers with the left-hand accompanied by sophisticated bowing patterns from the right arm. Within the genre there are subsequent layers of stylistic variations created by the individual performer. This results in a harmonious balance of retention of the tradition and individual thumbprints of a fiddler.

Three historical and stylistic generations will be identified, focusing on recordings of the fiddle tune ‘Sally Goodin’ by three performers who share a direct biographical lineage. The fiddlers studied are Eck Robertson (November 1887-February 1975), Benny Thomasson (April 1909- January 1984, and Mark O’ Connor (August 1961). The analysis of each player’s recorded version of ‘Sally Goodin’ will provide a more precise and nuanced picture of the stylistic modifications made by these three fiddlers within the Texas Contest tradition. Analysis focuses on diverse bowing styles, fiddle techniques, and each performers varying style of melodic development.

The significance of the hoedown ‘Sally Goodin’ originates from its strong precedence in the contest tradition as well its status as being the first contest fiddle tune recorded by Eck Robertson in 1922.¹ The original form of ‘Sally Goodin’ is an AB binary form with corresponding lyrics. The contest tradition omits lyrics, as “real fiddlers- ones from Texas- didn’t believe in polluting their fiddling by singing along”.² This simple and repetitive structure provides the appropriate framework for advanced ornamentation and planned improvisation techniques added by Texas contest fiddlers.

Fiddle hoedowns are presented with a 2/4 time signature, eighth note patterns, and a tempo that is typically between 110 and 120 beats per measure. Slur patterns typically heard in the contest fiddle version are slurred in the following three ways:



The first division slurs the first two notes and the last two notes together. The second pattern slurs three notes with one separate note performed on the up-bow. The final slur pattern begins with an up-bow with a single bow stroke before three notes are slurred on the down-bow. These

¹ Richard Carlin, *Country Music: A Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Rutledge, 2003), 347.

² Wolfe, *The Devils Box*, 18.

slur patterns are used in order to achieve the correct feel to the beat, and is emphasized when heard with the strumming of an accompany instrument of the banjo, guitar, mandolin, or bass.

After the contest style became an established approach, fiddlers were labeled as a dance musician or a contest fiddler. Very few straddled the two styles, but Eck Robertson was one of the unique individuals who practiced both traditions. Robertson's performance insight into both traditions results in the unique style of fiddling he demonstrates in his notable thirteen-variation recording of 'Sally Goodin'.

Robertson's fiddle style is characteristic of the early contest tradition that emphasized creative fiddling over precise and clean playing. Clean playing in the Texas Contest tradition is depicted by a pure tone and a tempo speed that is slower than typically heard in the Southern tradition. The slower tempo and pure tone quality provide the listener, or in most cases the judges, to be able to clearly hear the harmonic and ornamentations that the fiddler in question added to the tune. However, the influence of the Southern fiddle style is evident in Robertson's use of symmetrically phrased melodies and bowing style.

Fiddlers such as Robertson began utilizing more harmonic possibilities on the fiddle by experimenting with different positions on the instrument instead of the traditionally used first position. In Robertson's performance of 'Sally Goodin', he retunes his instrument into A tuning. The fiddle is tuned from G-D-A-E to A-E-A-E. The overtones produced from a cross tuned fiddle provides a richer texture for chords as well as the ability to play octaves while remaining in first position. When we look past the out of tune notes, and the occasional bow squeaks heard in recordings of Robertson's fiddle tunes, there lies a series of melodic developments that characterize Robertson's style of playing which produces a sound rough sound quality that is mostly due to the blend of bowing styles employed.

The majority of Robertson's fiddling is a Southern bowing style called the "shove and pull". In this method of fiddle bowings, the bow is pushed in an upwards motion on the string. The emphasis on the upward bow stroke is on the beginning of the note providing emphasis on each beat. The downward pull of the bow is a quick motion made by flicking of the wrist and creates a smoother sound than the "shove" of the up bow.

In the recording, *Old Time Texas Fiddler 1922-1929* by Eck Robertson, thirteen different variations of 'Sally Goodin' are heard. It is unnecessary to analyze every single variation of Robertson's as he uses similar variational techniques in his thirteen variations of 'Sally Goodin'. His melodic variations are set up in blocks of sound without transitional phrases linking the variations. Robertson alternates between octaves and slightly exploits the violin register with the use of positions.

The third variation Robertson plays is heard in the third hand position on the fiddle. The melodic development is based on the third finger sliding from first to third position. The slide provides an accent on the first beat as well as a drone like effect from the sliding fingers on the high E string emphasizing the tonic, A. For an instrumentalist, it is technically difficult to slide the hand up and down the E string for the whole a section of the melody while maintaining double stops with the A string. The overall effect is a drone against a bright and light melody that contrasts the simplicity of the basic tune of 'Sally Goodin'. The effect of the sliding E string

variation is heightened in difficulty with the next variation Robertson moves into. He begins an arpeggiated variation that uses complex finger patterns.

Robertson performs the melody an octave lower and uses double stops on the offbeat of the measure in both the A and B section. The variation uses syncopated offbeat rhythms of the main tune before reverting to the melody using double stops and string crossing on all four strings. This variation would be considered the climax of the variations as it is harmonically rich and uses metrical ambiguity. Following this dense section, Robertson moves into a minor mode section that is not found in the original melody, but through Robertson's influence has become a trademark variation for further performances of 'Sally Goodin'.

Significant changes can be heard in the performance of Benny Thomasson forty years later. Robertson's version of 'Sally Goodin' is believed to be the basis for Thomasson's version that can be heard in similarities of the melodic variation in some passages. Robertson's influence on Thomasson's fiddling is largely due to the fact "...many other fiddlers such as Eck Robertson and Lefty Franklin would often come to visit the Thomasson household and stay a few days to fiddle."³

Though Thomasson's fiddle style was innovative for the time, it evolved into a conservative approach to Texas Contest Fiddling in later generations. The style of playing resulted in the combination of traditional fiddling and highly ornamental aspects imposed onto the melody that became a highly contentious concept in this style of contest fiddling. Developments found in Thomasson's performance involve a liberal use of third position, extended ornamentation, and a changed bowing style. Thomasson best describes his variations on tunes in Interviews conducted by Michael Mendelsohn:

Now I play the same old tunes, but then I have arranged variations of the same parts in different positions on the fiddle, see.

And like you'd be playing an old tune like "Dusty Miller" or something, and the low part there, and then you get up there on your higher positions and make it sound... get a little bit different variation, and get a good sound out of it. And it don't make it come back to the same old monotonous. two-part deals there...⁴

The clearest indication of a generational shift from Robertson to Thomasson however is heard in the bowing technique. Thomasson is credited to standardizing the longbow technique rather than the shove and pull method of Robertson. An identifying marker in the longbow style is the way it sounds, and the distinct motion of the right wrist named the 'Texas wrist'. Thomasson's views on the long bow maintain that it was used for expressive purposes and the ability to provide contrasting sounds in a tune.

Through ignorance of what we were doing. A different type of bowing on a different tune, to make it sound different. I'll fit the stroke, the long stroke fits in certain places. and the short stroke. the long bow is one that ties in with the

³ Michael Mendelson, "Fiddle Sessions," *JEMF Quarterly Vol. 10.3* (Autumn 1974): 35.

⁴ Mendelson, "Fiddle Sessions," 35.

different strokes, with the different tunes, which placed in the right place there, is where you get your expression, and drive.⁵

When listening to this bowing style, it sounds as if the fiddler is using all one bow, slurring multiple notes at one time. In reality, the smoothness of the sound is due to the coordinating bow and wrist movement. When using this technique, the wrist must be limber so that there is no obvious spacing between the notes involving a coordination of both the wrist and forearm of the right, bowing arm. The combination of long bowing and intricate variations of the melody results in a clean expressive sound.

Thomasson's version of 'Sally Goodin' creates a linear musical line with a multipart melodic structure that is less repetitive when compared to Robertson's as the melody line is continually varied. Thomasson uses a total of sixteen different variants of the tune 'Sally Goodin' heard on the recording *Legendary Texas Fiddler*. While Thomasson is using similar melodic phrasing, his placement of the phrases and bowing patterns create the structural coherence within the piece. Heard in the variation is the use of the triplet not only as ornamentation, but a rhythmic variant of the tune.

Thomasson's first variation does not begin with the melody as Robertson's version did. Instead after a brief intro lead, the first variation is present using the G, D, and A string. The first variation is representative of the change in contest standards. This variation includes multiple ornamental notes added to the basic melody before moving into a technical set of arpeggios with multiple string crossings on all four strings of the fiddle. In the fourth variation, Thomasson uses the minor section added to the tune by Robertson. The main difference in the two performers within the variation discussed is the structural placement, tone quality, and slides into the third position extending two variants. Overall, Thomasson's variations include supplementary notes, frequent shifting, and a command of quick string crossings. Not once is the original melody of 'Sally Goodin' heard in Thomasson's variations of the tune.

The last fiddler in the fiddle lineage for the purpose of this paper is Mark O'Connor, a student of Benny Thomasson. O'Connor's fiddling represents a progressive approach to the Texas Contest tradition, as his performance is the conflation of multiple styles such as traditional contest fiddle and jazz styles. The culmination of these styles creates a decidedly unique, and unreplicable performance. O'Connor manipulates techniques that were standardized into the tradition by Thomasson, but many technical aspects did not change such as the slur patterns, use of positions, and longbow technique. However, O'Connor's ideas of melodic development and ornamentation of fiddle tunes are radically different due to the infusion of different stylistically elements. O'Connor's contest fiddle style pushed the boundaries of established traditional fiddling. He achieves this progressive nature to his performance by exploiting rhythmic patterns in Paganni-esque running passages, and extensive use of ornamentation that are typically found in classical violin performance such as harmonics and intricate left hand finger patterns.

⁵Margaret Elaine Schultz, "An Analytical Methodology for Study of Regional Fiddle Styles Applied to Texas Style Fiddling" (PhD diss., Oklahoma State University, 1979) 31.

O'Connor maintains the longbow style taught to him by Thomasson. He performs with a light and quick bow with a stroke that causes the space between notes to be almost nonexistent. O'Connor is known for holding the bow in an unconventional way. Instead of holding the thumb in the inner part of the bow, O'Connor places his thumb flat against the bottom of the bow, along the pearl or ivory section of the frog of the bow. This creates a bow grip that is notably more rounded providing a more flexible wrist in turn being able to drastically increase the speed of the bowing arm. O'Connor's playing is characteristically performed fast, tempos typically ten to twenty beats per measure faster than typical contest performances.

The first variation is reminiscent of the Robertson version as O'Connor goes down the octave. However, instead of cross tuning, O'Connor uses complex fingerings to create the same chordal structure. This passage represents the technical dexterities O'Connor brings into the Texas contest Style. The last variation presents the conflation of fiddle and classical violin elements. O'Connor performs in third position, extends the use of the triplet, and uses the natural harmonics as part of the melody. The accented slide driving the melody heard in Robertson's and Thomason's versions is still used for emphasis on the beginning of the A and B section. The dissonant harmonies created are not as pronounced as in Robertson's or Thomasson's versions. O'Connor in turn moves quickly through them focusing on the pure tone of the harmonic. The 1980 recording *The Championship Years* begins in first position, but employs intricate double stops at a faster tempo. Near the middle of the piece he moves up to third and fourth position on the fiddle while the last few measures involve "ghost notes", or harmonics. These "ghost notes" produce a wispy far-off sound while remaining in first position.

Distinct characteristics of each generational subgenre are still heard in subtle ways in the Texas Contest Tradition. These three generations of fiddlers represent performers who took the conservative form of the contest tradition and personally embellished it with radical techniques. By respectfully adding their own thumbprints to a landed tradition, the style of playing evolved in such a way that none of the genres ever completely left the tradition. Indeed, these effective virtuosos knew what they were doing and were aware of what kinds of changes they were making. Nowhere is this more aptly expressed than in a 1974 quote by Benny Thomasson

"You know young people coming up, learning the fiddle, they want to do everything they can... in more modern ways, you know. Times change. And I think...that as time changes, music should change to fit the playing now".⁶

Phrases heard in contests allude to the variations by Robertson, Thomasson, and O'Connor. The progression of melodic development within generations is representative of the unique aspects each player brought to the tradition. The effect these fiddlers had on the tradition is most significant and shows their fortitude in the tradition, as their variations have become integral parts of the contest fiddle canon.

⁶ Thomasson, Benny. Interview by Michael Mendelson. Old Time Fiddle Contest, Weiser, Idaho, 1974.