

Ozarks fiddling traditions

David Scrivner

Nathan Lee McAlister

America has a rich tradition of fiddle music, and the Ozarks region boasts a fiddling tradition as rich as anywhere in the country. Stretching out over the southern half of Missouri, northern Arkansas, much of eastern Oklahoma, and a small corner of southeast Kansas, the Ozarks region is a unique oasis in America's heartland. While offering recreational opportunities for tourists, the Ozarks have long been called home to generations of people who brought traditions from both their European homelands and southern Appalachia. In the last century, many aspects of Ozarks culture have been popularized in mainstream media, with special emphasis placed on the region's music. While the region's culture is rich in tradition, many of the folkways are becoming endangered. I met with fiddler David Scrivner to discuss his role in Ozarks fiddling, and to join him for some tunes.



David Scrivner is a traditional Ozarks style fiddler who specializes in square dance fiddling from the Douglas County, Missouri area

“I missed the trees and the hills and the music”

I first met David Scrivner in the early 2000s when we were both teenage fiddle players. Gordon McCann, the legendary Ozarks fiddling preservationist had invited a handful of young fiddle players from the region to perform at the Greene County Library in Springfield. In an effort to showcase new talent and offer a chance to network with other fiddlers, McCann inadvertently helped create strong friendships in the fiddling community that continue to this day. After going our separate ways, Scrivner and I reconnected as young adults and continue to play together regularly. David Scrivner is one of a handful of fiddlers that are at the forefront of Ozarks dance fiddling, and is playing a critical role in preserving this endangered part of American music.



“I grew up in Mansfield, Missouri. My family has lived in that area and also Taney County for generations,” he said. Scrivner grew up in a family of musicians. His father grew up in a family band, and continued the tradition of family music with his own children. “When I was five or six, my dad brought home some cheap mandolins from the pawn shop and that’s what we got for Christmas that year,” he said. Scrivner began taking lessons shortly thereafter, studying with Charlotte Blackwell in Seymour, Missouri. “She taught most of the bluegrass instruments,” he recalled. After beginning with mandolin, he explored guitar, banjo, and eventually the fiddle.

Around the age of 15, Scrivner began studying with legendary Ozarks square dance fiddler Bob Holt. Holt, known for his driving fiddle style, was a no-nonsense mentor that helped cultivate a crop of outstanding dance fiddlers. With Holt, Scrivner learned the driving style with the proper bow arm to drive a square dance. In an attempt describe the characteristics of Ozark fiddling, Scrivner places more emphasis on style than repertory. “It’s not the tunes. It’s the bowing,”



he says, referring to the economy of movement required to be a fast fiddler with lots of drive. “Bob would say ‘You’re getting the notes’ but that would mean I wasn’t getting the tune.” After years under the mentorship of Bob Holt, Scrivner began to develop the “accent” of traditional Ozark fiddle playing.

Along with Bob Holt, Scrivner credits many of his accomplishments to legendary Ozarks musician Alvie Dooms. “I learned a lot about how fiddle and guitar are supposed to work together. I learned a lot more about the stories behind tunes as well,” he added. Alvie Dooms was Bob Holt’s rhythm guitar player for decades, and has played a critical role in developing Ozark fiddlers. Dooms, perhaps more than anyone, has been one of the most nurturing figures in the Ozarks music scene.

“Alvie is so nurturing and encouraging, and whether they are adults or children he knows how to encourage them.”

After high school, Scrivner attended College of the Ozarks and The University of Dallas where he studied English and Literature. “I always came home in the summer because I wanted to play music as much as possible,” he said. “It’s interesting growing up around Mansfield. I always thought I was a city boy and then I moved to the city and realized I’m not a city boy. I missed the trees and the hills and the music,” he laughed.

Scrivner returned to the Ozarks after living in Dallas for a few years, and continued to play music around his favorite music spots in Douglas and Taney County, Missouri. Venues like the jam session at McClurg, Missouri, and the Hootin’ an Hollerin’ festival in Gainesville continued to draw groups of traditional fiddlers and dancers. As each year passed, fewer of the previous generation of musicians were returning to share their music with younger musicians.

“To get good at any tradition you have to be really committed to it”

Historically, fiddle tunes have been passed down through the oral tradition, with younger fiddlers learning tunes at community jam sessions with master musicians. In turn, regional styles were preserved and groups of fiddlers made their mark on younger generations. With the rise of technology and social media, Scrivner has witnessed a change in fiddling. “I think fiddling as a whole as become less distinct and tied to any tradition,” he says. “When I listen to stuff online, it’s hard for me to find something that is distinct enough that I want to learn it.” Scrivner, who has an extensive collection of traditional fiddle recordings, continues to refer to the older generation of players. “I feel like I’m still learning from the Ozarks masters,” he said, referring to recordings of Ozarks fiddlers along with other living master fiddlers.

With America having an expansive and diverse tradition of fiddling, Scrivner remains focused on the regional style that is so important to the fiddlers of the Ozarks region. “I know there’s some types of fiddle music that I’m probably never going to be able to do really well, so I just leave it alone,” he says.

The venues that have historically driven Ozarks fiddle playing have been square dances, fiddler’s conventions, and fiddle contests. Unfortunately, these events are all on the decline. Earlier generations of Ozarks fiddlers could find a square dance to attend almost nightly. Nowadays, square dances a very few and far between.

Similarly, regional fiddler’s conventions are limited to perhaps one or two per year, and fiddle contests are almost nonexistent. The effects of Covid-19 pandemic have only added complications to an already



threatened tradition, keeping regional fiddlers and dancers at home.

With the fast paced world we live in, musicians like myself and Scrivner wonder what will become of the cherished traditions from our past. “I would like to say that I have hope it stays alive in the Ozarks. I see the effects of the internet and popular culture swaying people away from this type of fiddle music,” he says. Like many younger regional fiddlers, Scrivner clings tightly to the remaining master fiddlers in the Ozarks. Players like Noel Scott, Bill Conley, and H.K. Silvey are passing the torch to Scrivner’s and my generation. Still, the question remains if there will be anyone for us to hand the tradition.

Jokingly, I asked Scrivner if he now sees us as the “old guys” now. “Yes” he laughed. “We have the ties to that tradition. Our fiddling is indelibly stamped with that tradition in a way that people who didn’t learn in that tradition will never sound like unless they work really hard.” Still, he admits there is still work to be done. “We are all just trying to get better.” NLM



Alvie Dooms, Kim Lansford, David Scrivner, and Nathan Lee McAlister