

1-1-2013

## Driving the Bow: Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic, 2nd edition

Chris J. Goertzen

University of Southern Mississippi, Christopher.Goertzen@usm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://aquila.usm.edu/fac\\_pubs](https://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs)



Part of the [Music Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Goertzen, C. J. (2013). Driving the Bow: Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic, 2nd edition. *Journal of American Folklore*, 126(499), 103-104.

Available at: [https://aquila.usm.edu/fac\\_pubs/7681](https://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs/7681)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact [aquilastaff@usm.edu](mailto:aquilastaff@usm.edu).

when used to pursue a political agenda, whether villainous or virtuous.

*Music as Social Life* is a straightforward and accessible read, intended to reach the general public. The seamless flow from one concept to another and the many examples and anecdotes shared by the author make for an agreeable experience as well as an enlightening one.

**Driving the Bow: Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic**, 2nd edition. Ed. Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger. (Aberdeen, Scotland: The Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, 2008. Pp. 226, preface, notes, references, 14 black-and-white photographs, 2 maps, 60 music transcriptions, 4 tables, 4 other illustrations, bibliography, index.)

CHRIS GOERTZEN

*University of Southern Mississippi*

Research on fiddle music of the North Atlantic world, of the Nordic countries, and of English-speaking ones (or bilingual cultures, with English being one of the languages) has always been dominated by an intimate mix of scholar/performers and performer/scholars. The vast majority of those among these researchers who have formal academic training are folklorists, but many researchers, while careful and energetic, do not have “book” training as either musicians or scholars. An overlapping, slimmer, but still substantial majority are natives of and working in the countries whose fiddling they study. Much contemporary research remains strongly oriented toward meticulous reportage of history, repertoire, and style. Many performers with a scholarly bent focus on the histories of their fiddle repertoires (often with some nostalgic tinting), and most academics who fiddle favor older styles—in many countries, these tend to be easier to wrap one’s fingers around in an elementary way—have a linked predilection for salvage folklore, and tend to romanticize fiddling every bit as much as do the performer/scholars. In a complementary trend, other researchers prefer to examine recent and ongoing changes in fiddling, looking especially at how new contexts favor innovations for good or ill.

This collection is the second in a series coming out of a recurring event, the North Atlantic Fiddle Convention (held in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 2001 and 2006, in St. John’s, Newfoundland, in 2008, again in Aberdeen in 2010, and in Derry, Northern Ireland, in 2012). The articles in *Driving the Bow* represent modest expansions of many of the papers read at the second conference. (In a world in which symmetry came more easily, there would also be a CD from each conference representing the concerts and evening jam sessions that are every bit as central to the proceedings.) The authors, a representative array of performer/scholars and scholar/performers, explore an apt sampling of fiddle research topics. After the first essay, Alan Jabbour’s elegant conference keynote speech, “Fiddle Tunes of the Old Frontier” (meaning the US Upper South), the articles move roughly from east to west in geographical focus, and at the same time, move on the average from the distant past to much closer to today.

Gaila Kirdienė, in “The Folk Fiddle Music of Lithuania’s Coastal Regions,” presents a detailed profile of the fiddlers, fiddle history, and fiddle styles in what she describes as one of the five basic style areas of Lithuania. This is basic, factual ethnography, welcome because there is precious little published on Lithuanian folk music of any kind in English. Although music transcriptions abound in this article, the lack of a companion CD is especially sad here. Next comes a set of three essays describing the lives and research of prominent individual fiddlers/scholars of the past. Katherine Campbell writes about the life and activities of Scottish amateur fiddler and collector George Riddell (1853–1942) and annotates some songs and tunes gathered up and published by this early community salvage folklorist. Elaine Bradke reports on an ongoing project to make accessible James Madison Carpenter’s (1888–1984) collections in England, particularly from dance fiddler Sam Bennett (1865–1951), himself a collector, and two other similarly long-lived English dance musicians. She compares the repertoires and styles of the three on the basis of contemporary comments and from Carpenter’s transcriptions. Eoghan Neff describes the performance practice of semi-professional fiddler John Doherty

(1895–1980; fiddling is a healthy activity) of Donegal, Ireland, as a takeoff point for arguing that Donegal fiddling tends to be surprisingly individualistic in terms of approaches to form (both broad and intimate) and to timbre.

Three articles on folk dances done to fiddle follow; the first two essays focus on the dance itself. In the more general of these, Mats Nilsson describes how Swedish folk dance genres reflect myriad influences from neighboring cultures. Karin Erikssohn looks at how one Swedish dance genre, the *engelska* (meaning “the English”), became a genre somewhat neglected, for reasons reflecting the politics of scholarship and of the folk revival (which I consider to overlap even more in the Nordic countries than in Britain and North America). The third article in this set is quite virtuosic. Katherine Shoupe, in “The Problem with Scottish Dance Music,” analyzes in striking detail and clarity the difference between current Scottish folk fiddle and dance performances that are more oriented toward tradition in general and toward nuance in the movements of the dance versus performances that are intended primarily for a listening public.

Shoupe’s fine article both caps the section focusing on dance and vigorously launches the second half of the book, which is much more analytical than the first half, and more concerned with specific sonic symptoms of change. Matt Cranitch examines “The Rhythmic Dimension in [Irish] Fiddle-Playing as the Music Moves to Newer Performing and Learning Contexts,” with results congruent with Shoupe’s conclusions—he finds that many modern Irish fiddlers have lost some degree of rhythmic delicacy and variety because they seldom play for dances. In the following article, Pat Ballantyne notes that Cape Breton step dances are incorporating new steps and becoming more eye-oriented, but without losing touch with tradition. In the following two articles, George Ruckert and Gregory J. Dorchak examine how innovation and tradition are meeting somewhat uneasily in Cape Breton fiddling.

The final two articles in this far-ranging collection bring the reader to Canada. One concerns contest fiddling: Sherry Johnson brings her experience as fiddler, judge, and observer to bear to illuminate contest strategies in very specific ways (right down to transcribing curls of melody

to show variation techniques). Last, Elisa Serano-Janz describes an amateur chamber ensemble in Calgary where fiddle music is employed as technically accessible new repertoire for an ensemble that mostly plays baroque music.

This is a much meatier book than the page count suggests, since the prose is supplemented by so many physically compact yet quite telling illustrations of all sorts. Absolutely everyone who studies fiddle music of any North Atlantic country ought to corral a copy of this and the other compilations in the series, as should many folklorists interested in revival processes, in the intriguing sociology of this branch of our field, or in the folklore of the specific countries concerned.

**Ramblin’ on My Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues.** Ed. David Evans. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. Pp. 430, contributors, illustrations, index.)

MITSUTOSHI INABA  
*Independent Scholar*

Willie Dixon, a famed blues songwriter known for his Chicago blues classics including “Hoochie Coochie Man” for Muddy Waters, “Spoonful” for Howlin’ Wolf, and “My Babe” for Little Walter, once said: “All American music came from the blues.” Dixon’s statement contains a bit of exaggeration, but there still is no doubt that the blues occupies a significant part of the history of American music and culture. David Evans, the editor of *Ramblin’ on My Mind: New Perspective on the Blues*, mentions in the introduction: “Previous writers had almost universally viewed it [the blues] as either simply a type of folk music, or more or less anonymous and unchanging, or a ‘root’ form of jazz, worthy of a chapter or two at the beginning of any study of that genre” (p. 1). Evans continues: “What was lacking, except among musicians themselves and their immediate audiences, was a sense of blues as a distinct type of music with its own personalities, stylistic variety, and history of musical development” (p. 1).

Although Evans uses the past tense for the above statement, the same idea persists today,