

IN THE TRADITION:

# ILLINOIS FIDDLE

AN EVENING OF  
TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF  
ILLINOIS AND THE MIDWEST

FEATURING  
THE  
VERBLE BROTHERS

AND  
LYNN "CHIRPS" SMITH

*PRESENTED BY THE DAVID ADLER CULTURAL  
CENTER ON SEPTEMBER 19, 1992*

## Old Time Fiddling in the Midwest: The Verble Brothers and Lynn "Chirps" Smith

Among enthusiasts of old-time fiddling, the Midwestern fiddler has been too often neglected. When early recording company talent scouts gave contracts, meager though they were, to such stellar southern fiddlers as Charlie Brown and Ben Jarrell, they overlooked such equally gifted peers as Indiana's Frank Wisehart and many others from Michigan, Illinois and Iowa. When Clayton McMichen and Arthur Smith were gaining riches and renown as the best "hillbilly" fiddlers in the business, Nebraska's Bob Walters was broadcasting his prowess in the relative anonymity of small town radio. And when thousands of young city-bred old-timey disciples made pilgrimages to the meccas of Galax, Virginia and Mt. Airy, North Carolina (home of Tommy Jarrell), only a small handful came to call on the astonishing John Summers of Marion, Indiana or Pappy Taylor of Effingham, Illinois.

The distinctive musical characteristics of old-time fiddling in the Midwest are difficult to describe without embarking on a prolonged technical exposition. In short, Midwestern fiddlers play in a straightforward manner. Tunes are seldom adorned with melodic embellishments such as trills or rolls, nor are they augmented harmonically beyond the occasional use of double stops. (Contest fiddlers from the Midwest present contrary evidence, but it could be argued that they represent a nationally dominant super-style more than a local regional dialect.) Rhythmically, the Midwestern style could be described as "square," in that bow strokes solidly emphasize the downbeat. I have found few instances of the syncopated bowing patterns (stressing the off-beats) that are widespread among the Southern fiddlers.

The Midwestern fiddler's repertoire also represents a mixed bag of southern and northern influences. It is less rhythmic and more "notey" than southern styles, but also less melodically intricate than the Scottish - and Irish - influenced idiom found in New England. Jigs and other tunes in 6/8 time, while not widespread, are known in the Midwest, while absent in the South. The older stock of 2/4 tunes played in the Midwest - such as "Turkey in the Straw," "Arkansas Traveler," "Soldier's Joy," and "Liberty" - mirrors the standard repertoire of square dance fiddlers in all corners of the United States. A number of fiddlers and tune collectors, however, have preserved or recorded a substantial treasure of unique and interesting archaic pieces that predate the supposed leveling influences of mass-mediated musical tastes. Most traditional Midwestern fiddle tunes, both the rare and the common, were made for dancing. Though they are harmonically square, emphasizing the notes of the primary chords, they impart a lively exuberance to old time hoedowns and quadrilles.

Growing up in Union County, near the southern tip of Illinois, Dan Verble (b.1915) heard plenty of old time music from his three uncles and his father. Even though his dad played the banjo and guitar, "fiddle is the one that struck me, it almost made chills run up and down my spine when I was a small boy." When Dan took up the fiddle, his brother Marion (five years his junior) started on guitar, and soon their family trio would play for their own enjoyment till eleven o'clock or so each night after chores were done on the farm.

The Verble Brothers organized a succession of bands with contemporaries from their own district. *The Little Creek Ramblers* (named after the local school) entertained with fiddle music and old time songs at pie supper and other community socials. After WEBQ Harrisburg auditioned them in the late 1930's, they went on the radio as the *Roving Cowboys* and later as the *Roving Ranch Hands*. Up until 1941 or 1942, they booked an old theater, charged admission and broadcast live as the "Barnyard Jamboree," modeled after WLS's "National Barn Dance." Before World War II split them up, the *Roving Ranch Hands* had won the 1941 Hillbilly and Western Band Championship in Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

After The War, the band reformed as a trio, and stayed in radio until 1949. During that time, they teamed up with the *Pleasant Valley Cowgirls* in a fortuitous partnership that led to the marriage of Dan Verble and Cowgirl Helen Fisher. Though their radio days eventually ended, the Verble Brothers never quit playing. Since 1981, when Dan retired from his career in sales, they have been much more active. Though she is unfortunately not able to travel, Helen and Dan still play together at home, the kind of old time songs and tunes that chilled Dan's spine back when he was a young boy.

Lynn "Chirps" Smith (b. 1952) fell in love with those same kind of tunes when he was growing up in Charleston, Illinois. But it was not at home where he heard such music played. In the wake of interest in old time fiddling created by the urban folk music revival of the the 1950's Chirps was able to hear recordings of Ben Jarrell and some of the other great southern fiddlers recorded in the early decades of this century.

It was through Gary Harrison, an avid collector of Illinois tunes and a great fiddler himself, that Chirps became enamored with the largely undiscovered Midwestern fiddle tradition. He played mandolin with Gary's band, the *Indian Creek Delta Boys* from 1972 to 1978, when he moved north. After a time on mandolin with the *Polecats* (playing behind Chicago's fine fiddling guru, Mark Guenther), Chirps eventually made the transition to fiddler. Since 1985, he has been playing old time music with the *Volo Bogtrotters*. Through three LPs with the "Creek Delters," three cassettes from the "Volos," and two solo albums (the second is forthcoming), Chirps has made a strong musical statement of regional pride.

The combination of senior musicians, conservers of tradition, and young disciples, who carefully document and recreate traditional sounds, makes it possible to rescue from undeserved neglect the vibrant fiddling traditions of Illinois, Indiana and the greater Midwest.

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This concert was produced by the David Adler Cultural Center. Funds for this production were provided by the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more information about traditional music and culture, please contact the Adler Center at 708/367-0707.

*"In the Tradition"* programs highlight the diversity and vitality of ethnic and regional traditions in the Midwest. All events are documented on videotape and are available throughout the area library system.

The David Adler Cultural Center, a non-profit organization, offers classes and individual lessons in the visual arts, Suzuki violin and piano, traditional music and children's theater. It also presents an extensive program of art exhibitions, music performances, barn dances and concerts. For more information, call 708/367-0707.



### UPCOMING "IN THE TRADITION" EVENTS

#### **Elite Syncopators**

Friday, October 2, 8 p.m.

David Adler Center Ballroom

#### **The Indian Creek Delta Boys**

Community Barn Dance

Saturday, October 3, 8 p.m.

DanceCenter North - 540 N. Milwaukee, Second Floor

#### **Arnold and Sima Miller**

Saturday, October 17, 7:30 p.m.

Libertyville High School Studio Theater

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