

**VARIATION AND THE TUNE:  
A STUDY OF A FIDDLER'S  
ARTISTRY AND AESTHETICS**

In the study of folksong, it has long been recognized that songs exist in a fluid state. Phillips Barry expressed the matter succinctly when he wrote, "There are texts, but no text; tunes, but no tune" (1961, p. 59). In his view, the genuine folksinger is an individual artist with the right to be called a creator of the songs, along with all other past, present, and future singers of that songs (p. 71). Albert Lord stretched the concept of re-creation to a more radical position: "each performance is more than a performance: it is a re-creation" (1978, p. 101).

When I first encountered the oral-formulaic theory advanced by Lord and his mentor, Millman Parry, I was struck by the possibility that it could be applied to traditional Anglo-American fiddling to show that fiddlers create a tune anew in each performance out of a stock of tune ideas, melodic formulas, and variations. But then as I began to listen more closely to several fiddlers I knew, it seemed that the tune and also its variations were stable in form, firmly or rigidly fixed in the mind of the performer.

This study was conceived as an attempt to determine by means of transcription and analysis of the tunes, and by questioning the performer, to what extent melodies and variations are fixed in the playing of one fiddler, Ken Smelser of Orange County, Indiana. My initial assumption was that Mr. Smelser's renditions of tunes was based on well worked-out melodies and variations. Analysis would show, I thought, a strongly fixed tune and set of variations which would differ only slightly from performance to performance.

The results of my analysis were not what I expected. Though I did not find support for an oral-formulaic theory that could account for all the workings of the fiddler's mind, Mr. Smelser's tunes exist in a more fluid state than I had been able to perceive without the aid of transcriptions.

Mr. Smelser exhibits a conservative tendency in that he maintains the identity of each tune as a melodic contour, or as a set of specific configurations. On the other hand, he recognizes the truth of the folklorist's dictum, that there are tunes but no tune, in the sense of a 'correct' way of playing a piece. He values variation and tunes that you can do something with, but does not indulge in variation for variation's sake, or in mixing melodic formulas from separate tunes. These points will be discussed further in sections of variation and tune differentiation.

Ken Smelser was born in 1913 near Muncie, Indiana. His family moved south to Orange County when he was young. Customary entertainment in the Smelser family was to gather around the pump organ after the evening meal to sing old familiar songs and newer popular pieces, both sacred and secular. Several of Mr. Smelser's brothers were good singers and guitarists. He took up the fiddle at the age of ten learning some from his grandfather and others from local fiddlers such as Alec Moon. Mr. Smelser continued to play until he put the fiddle aside sometime around 1950. He became inspired to play again in the early 1960s when folk song collectors Arthur Rosenbaum and Pat Dunford came to visit his brother Vern. Ken Smelser recorded fiddle tunes for Rosenbaum and Dunford in 1963, and again in 1966. These recordings are deposited at the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University.

When he started fiddling again, Mr. Smelser was somewhat frustrated by the lack of musicians in the area with whom he could play. He wanted to learn some new tunes, but the traditional source, other fiddlers, was seemingly non-existent. Using hymn books, his wife Mildred helped him to learn to read notes so that he could learn tunes from a book he had, *1,000 Fiddle Tunes*. Sacred music was not alien to Mr. Smelser, for at one time he had sung alto in a male gospel quartet.

In 1973 or '74, another folk music enthusiast, Dillon Bustin, made Mr. Smelser's acquaintance and provided a new spark to his fiddling. He introduced Mr. Smelser to a number of other musicians, both young 'revivalists' and traditional performers; and also helped him find sources for new tunes—records and books.

In the last six or seven years, especially since he has retired, Mr. Smelser has devoted a great deal of time to his fiddling. He has learned many new tunes from several fiddling traditions. His favorites until recently were tunes from Canadian fiddlers. Now he has been given a record of Orkney Island fiddling and has learned about half of the pieces on that record. These were the tunes he played first at my most recent session with him.

Mr. Smelser has also been teaching several members of his family to play, one grandson and several daughters. With daughter Mary Ruth Riley, son Burl, and several others, he has formed a family band that occasionally performs in the area. Several friends, Maurice "Mousy" Wininger and Carmen Walker, are also regular musical companions. In various combinations, these musicians have been recorded in 1980 and '81 for the Archives of Traditional Music by David A. Brose and myself.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to determine how stable a tune is in the performer's mind, I have transcribed and analyzed performances of six tunes played on several different occasions. Representative transcriptions of five of these tunes are included in the Appendix. To clarify observations derived from the transcribed performances, I have relied on the comments made by Mr. Smelser at the various interview sessions. In my most recent meeting with him, I attempted to elicit from him both articulated criticism and behavior related to his fiddling that reveal how a tune exists

in his cognition and performance. If there are no clear answers, it is no fault of Mr. Smelser's, but of the analyst's failure to comprehend everything that was 'said' to him. Mr. Smelser's aesthetics, his set of artistic values and preferences, is a complex entity; it serves him well. I am the self-invited inquisitor who is trying to understand something that operates effectively whether it is understood or not. That said, I will carry on with my attempt to understand why a fiddler plays in the manner he does, and why he chooses certain tunes and configurations of notes, and not others.

This study will focus on the older part of Mr. Smelser's repertoire, the common breakdowns played by 'old-timers.' These are not necessarily the most valued pieces in Mr. Smelser's repertoire, but he does play them regularly. Apparently the "Chinese Breakdown" was not known by him when he took up the fiddle again in the 1960s; but if frequency is the criterion, this tune must be ranked as one of his favorites. "Chinese Breakdown" and "Little Star" (for which no transcription is included in the Appendix) differ from the other tunes studied, in that they are long tunes. The melody of these tunes are made up of strains that are sixteen measures long, comprised of four phrases of four measures each. The other four tunes discussed here have the standard form of traditional Anglo-American dance tunes: they are "White River Bottoms," "Devil's Dream," "Wild Horse," and "Wake Up Susan."

The typical fiddle tune known as a breakdown is a duple meter tune played with a strong, steady beat. The tune itself is usually 32 measures long, and is repeated as often as necessary—for the dancers—or as desired by the performer. Repetitions of the tune are opportunities for variation; so also are performances of the tune on different occasions. Repetition is also a major internal structural feature of the melody. I will focus on both types of repetition in this study.

To facilitate the analysis, I found it helpful to devise a set of symbols for the various

structural features of a tune and the performance of it. In terms of the latter, there is the performance itself. I have labeled the different performance occasions with roman numerals, and have given prime marks (' and ") for additional performances of a tune on that occasion. A performance involves multiple repetitions of the tune. These I have labeled with lower case letters. The tune itself is made up of two, sometimes more, strains that are usually eight measures long (four and sixteen measure strains are also common). The standard pattern is to play each strain twice, hence, one time through the tune is A1A2B1B2. A section of the tune is a strain and the 'proper' number of repetitions (some tunes are 'irregular' or idiosyncratic in tradition), with the sections being commonly referred to as the 'A part' and the 'B part.'

The strains that make up fiddle tunes also exhibit a fairly consistent structure in the tradition. Each strain can usually be divided into two halves, and each half can again be divided into two halves or phrases. The first phrase of the second half is quite often a repeat or restatement of the first phrase of the first half. Here is another opportunity for variation. The typical phrasal structure of a strain can be symbolized as 'abac' (or 'aba'c' if the second 'a' is a restatement of the first). Also, the fourth phrase of the second strain (the B part) may be a return to the fourth phrase of the first strain (the A part). In one of the tunes to be discussed, "White River Bottoms," the phrases also seemed to be divisible into two halves. Each measure stands as an independent unit of the tune. The first halves of the first three phrases are repetitions of the same melodic material. Since repetition is a major characteristic of Anglo-American fiddle tunes, the question that guides this study can be restated as follows: to what extent is repeated melodic material stable in a fiddler's performance? This study will address this question from two angles: from a discussion of variation and from the problem of how tunes are identified or differentiated from each other.

## VARIATION

In an earlier study of variation in a fiddle tune, Linda Burman drew a distinction between what she called structural and non-structural variations. Structural variations are those which she found “occurred more or less in order, each time the piece was played through.” Non-structural variations are those which occur in no logical pattern and would probably not be duplicated in other performances of the piece. In making this distinction, Burman suggested structural variations are deliberate, though not necessarily premeditated, while non-structural variations are unplanned (1968, p. 56).

I am not convinced that these distinctions are helpful in understanding how the performer’s mind works in relation to his or her performance. Burman’s assumption seems to be that the fiddler’s values are essentially conservative; that he strives above all for order and regularity. If planned variations are equated with a logical pattern or duplicated order, inventiveness would seem to have no meaning in the analysis of traditional fiddling. It is not difficult to imagine other explanations for variations that show up only once: they might be one of a number of readily available combinations of melodic materials, or they may be combinations tried once and rejected. In any event, Burman suggested that it would be helpful to look at several performances of a tune by the same fiddler, but she did not do so in her study. I have tried to take that step in this study.

There are three general categories of variation that my analysis suggests are significant: variations of phrases, variations of whole strains, and varying combinations of variations. Each of these categories will be discussed in terms of one sample transcription. It seems obvious that the second category falls in the realm of premeditation. It is a matter of choice for the performer to substitute an alternate strain for what had been played earlier (see, for example, “Devil’s

Dream”—VI b A'1&2). Variations of phrases are harder to pin down in terms of the performer's intentions. They are usually minor in scope. The fact that variations are found in different combinations suggests that there is some degree of conscious inventiveness in Mr. Smelser's fiddling, but does not necessarily imply that every note and rhythmic turn is planned. It is possible that the performer is surprised at some of the combinations that come out of his fiddle. A closer look at the transcriptions and Mr. Smelser's critical comments does not supply any ready answers, but the possibilities may be more clearly comprehended.

“White River Bottoms” is a tune in which the variations are mostly limited to alterations of the phrase. I transcribed and analyzed five performances of the tune recorded on three separate occasions: one from 1966, another from 1980, and three from the session of May 17, 1981. Transcriptions of two of the performances are included in the Appendix. “White River Bottoms” is a tune that is a strong part of the fiddling traditions of south central Indiana, but does not seem to be known outside of that area. Mr. Smelser attests to the popularity of the tune in the local area: “the old fiddlers, a lot of different fiddlers, they all played the ‘White River Bottoms’; all the fiddlers I know’d” (Interview with D.A. Brose, 5-17-81). However, I was not sure that Mr. Smelser thought much of the piece, he had never played it except at my request, until he recently remarked, “That’s about as good a tune as there is” (11-27-81).

As mentioned earlier, “White River Bottoms” is a tune in which each phrase is made up of two relatively independent halves. Because of this characteristic, the variations made in one measure do not necessarily lead to variations in the next. The one consistent exception is the transition from measure four to five in the A section. As Mr. Smelser plays the piece, there are a few examples of the third category of variations, varying combinations of variations, and none of the second category, variations of the strain.

A vertical comparison of all the renditions of a single measure or half phrase show several patterns. First of all, the general contour of the melody is sustained in nearly all the variations. In the A section, variations are either minor alterations in the direction of a run of notes—e.g., compare measures two and three of IV a A1 and b A1—or a change in the notes that follow the contour—e.g., measures four and six of the same strains. In a few instances, alterations involve both a change in contour and in density—e.g., compare measure one of the basic form of II and IV a A1&A2. In the B section, the majority of variations are rhythmic rather than in terms of melodic contour. These variations in phrase are minor; overall, the melodic form is consistent.

The impression of consistency is intensified by a comparison of performances. The points of the melody that show the most fluidity are the second halves of the ‘a’ phrases in both strains; that is, measure two and six, ten and fourteen. There is more consistency in the renditions of these measures than from performance to performance. This internal consistency was greatest in the performance recorded in 1980, making it possible to construct a basic form of the tune as performed on that occasion (II). However, this would be much harder to do for the three performances recorded on May 17, 1981. On that occasion, Mr. Smelser began to experiment more and more until he came up with a whole new contour in measures two and six (transcribed on the bottom line). On the next time through the A strain, he combined pieces of another tune, “Liberty,” with the general tune of “White River Bottoms.” On the repeat of the the A strain he ----- completely to the new tune. An analysis of his versions of the two tunes [shows] no great similarity except for the key and the range of the melody.

The conclusion the analysis seems to lead to is that “White River Bottoms” is a fixed melodic entity in Mr. Smelser’s mind. In the A section, however, the specific configurations of

notes are not fixed, especially in measures two and six which are neither repetitions of the opening theme (as are measures three and five), nor endings of the strain or half strain (as are measures four, seven, and eight). The B section has a more stable basic form, a series of arpeggios, that lends itself to rhythmic alterations.

“The Devil’s Dream” is a standard breakdown in the repertoires of fiddlers from all regions of the country. The basic form of the melody as Mr. Smelser plays it, the variation he usually plays the first time through (see VI a A1&2 B1&2), is essentially the standard printed version of the tune (see *1,000 Fiddle Tunes*, p. 30). There are enough consistent differences, though, to suggest that he did not learn it from the book. Of the tune, he says, “can’t do much with that thing,” but transcription reveals that he does do a lot with it. In its basic form, the “Devil’s Dream” is very repetitive with little, only the ‘a’ phrase to differentiate between the A and B sections. Mr. Smelser maintains the same density of notes throughout, but varies the contour of several phrases. He performs the ‘c’ phrase in both sections in three or four different ways. Also, he frequently turns the second ‘a’ phrase into an arpeggio (see a A1 & B1); in the printed versions, this phrase is usually a repeat of the initial ‘a’ phrase.

The major variations introduced by Mr. Smelser into the “Devil’s Dream” are alternate strains. A' is an extension of the initial phrase up the scale (see b A'1&2) He does not introduce this variant strain at the same point in different performances of the tune. The structure of the performance recorded in 1980 is as follows: a A1A'2A'3B1B2 b A'1A'2B'1B'2B'3. In the performance transcribed in the Appendix, the variant B strain was not introduced when he first performed the tune. The structure of that performance was a A1A2B2B2 b A'1A'2 cA1A2. On the first measure of c A1, he had started to play something different, but paused and continued with the A strain. When questioned, he couldn’t recall what he had started to play. While we

talked, he softly played through the A and B strains and then began the B variation. The VI performance is what followed.: dB'1 e A1A2B1B'2 f A1.

Why is it that Mr. Smelser claims he can't do much with the "Devil's Dream?" The fact of variation itself does not seem to be the issue. First of all, he does have variation, some of his own devising, for the tune, and he does not always use these in the same order. Secondly, the variant of the B strain, which he learned from a recorded version, is similar to a high variant strain he knows of another tune, "Little Star." This tune is one that was part of the fiddle tradition of Orange County when he was young, while the high variant is something he picked up from a record. He does not include this variation in his performances of the tune: "I like the old way best myself" (Interview, 11-17-81).

Some tunes in Mr.s Smelser's repertoire seem to be fixed in greater detail than "White River Bottoms." The "Devil's Dream," for example, has a basic form, except for the 'c' phrase, from which variations derive. "Chinese Breakdown" is a tune with an even more stable basic melody, perhaps because it is one of the tunes that Mr. Smelser has taught to his daughter, Mary Ruth Riley. (I don't think he has taught her any of the other tunes discussed in this study.) The transcription of "Chinese Breakdown" included in the Appendix was a duet played by Mr. Smelser and Mary Ruth at a concert for school children on May 15, 1981. Mary Ruth plays the melody line, which is only transcribed once, with a minimum of variation. She told the audience:

Fiddle is . . . you can add a lot of notes to it, if you can play fast enough, and I haven't learned to play quite that fast yet. But on this tune, Dad can put in . . . a lot more notes. I'm just playing the basic tune. He'll be adding notes and doing fancy fiddling on this one.

Perhaps what Mr. Smelser means by doing something with a tune is adding notes;

something which is not very easy to do with a tune like the “Devil’s Dream.” More than likely, doing something to a tune means to him devising a harmony part. Most of the harmony parts that Mr. Smelser comes up with are alto parts that parallel the melody (see III a B and (II) c A&B). Less frequently, he creates variant strains—e.g. b A&B. The variant B strain was played by him in all three performances of the tune transcribed and analyzed—compare, for example, III b B and (II) c B—but always in slightly different renditions. The variant A strain is used in only two of the three performances, but was more dominant in an untranscribed performance recorded on Nov. 27, 1981. The greater density of notes in the A variant allowed Mr. Smelser to both follow the melodic contour and hit some of the alto part. Variations from performance to performance of this strain seem to be minor changes in the phrases. The B variant, probably because it is less melodic, allows for segments of it to be combined in varying combinations with parallel alto configurations. The possible combinations are great. There is more variation and inventiveness in “Chinese Breakdown” than in any of the other tunes transcribed. The alto part can also be rendered in numerous ways. It is not a set form worked out in advance. Mr. Smelser describes it as similar to singing in a gospel Quartet: “It’s just about the same; you learn that part same as the lead part, you know. That’s about all it is” (Interview, 11-27-81). What guides his harmonizing is what also guides his renditions of melodies: a knowledge of the chordal structure and a fairly definite idea of where the tune is going, its contour.

#### TUNE IDENTITY AND DIFFERENTIATION

A question related to the problems we’ve been discussing, variation and stability, concerns what it is that differentiates one tune from another. On what is the identity of a tune based? There seems to be no clear-cut answer to these questions provided by Mr. Smelser’s

repertoire and critical comments. On the one hand, he is fond of noticing similarities between two tunes. He recently played “Faded Love” for me and then commented, “about the same as ‘Darling Nellie Gray,’ ain’t it?” And when he demonstrated the similarities of chordal structure and the general direction of the melodic contour, I had to conclude that he was right. On the other hand, he scrupulously avoids mixing melodic themes or formulas from one tune with those of another, no matter what the similarities, except occasionally as a joke.

There is one notable exception to this rule, the family of tunes known as “Wake Up Susan.” Mr. Smelser originally learned a version of this tune as “Wild Horse,” from local fiddler Alec Moon. He suggests that “Wake Up Susan” is a newer version of the older and simpler “Wild Horse.” He maintains a strict distinction between the two tunes only in terms of the B strain. He has two variants of the strain for “Wake Up Susan,” and one higher variant that he plays for “Wild Horse.” There are two variants of the A strain, substantially different in only the ‘a’ phrase; but neither variant seems to be the property of one title or the other. The chordal structure of the A variants are the same. This is not true for the B strains. It should also be mentioned that he plays another tune called “Redbird,” learned recently from a record. This piece has an A strain like the others, and a B strain that follows the same basic contour of “Wild Horse,” but with a greater density of notes. (“Redbird” also has a C strain.) Mr. Smelser maintains this tune as an independent entity, though he recognizes that it’s “about the same thing” as the others. Examples of his renderings of these tunes are transcribed in the Appendix.

## CONCLUSIONS

Ken Smelser’s aesthetic system seems to be governed by two opposing tendencies: he is both conservative and creative. On the one hand, he maintains a respect for the tunes as he

learned them and as he has heard other fiddlers play them. On the other hand, his repertoire is dynamic. It is always expanding as he adds both new tunes and new ideas in old favorites. There is both stability and fluidity in his artistry. The tunes and variations he plays are fixed to a certain degree for several reasons: 1) out of respect for his sources, 2) because of the necessities of teaching and playing with others, and 3) as a matter of his aesthetic preferences. In terms of creativity, Ken Smelser recognizes along with folklorists like Barry and Lord that there is more than one way to play a tune or a phrase. He is able to create variant renderings of a tune because of his knowledge of chordal structure, his artistic skill, and his desire to do something with a tune.

# WHITE RIVER BOTTOMS

Handwritten musical score for page 14, titled "WHITE RIVER BOTTOMS". The score consists of ten staves of music in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The score is divided into sections labeled with letters and numbers in boxes: I a A<sub>1</sub>, A<sub>2</sub>, b A<sub>1</sub>, A<sub>2</sub>, c A<sub>1</sub>, II b F A, IV' a A<sub>1</sub>, A<sub>2</sub>, b A<sub>1</sub>, A<sub>2</sub>, c A<sub>1</sub>, and IV'' b A<sub>1</sub>. The word "fine" is written at the end of the second and tenth staves. Measure numbers 1 through 9 are indicated at the top of the staves.

# WHITE RIVER BOTTOMS

Handwritten musical score for page 15, titled "WHITE RIVER BOTTOMS". The score consists of ten staves of music in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The score is divided into sections labeled with letters and numbers in boxes: I a B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2</sub>, b B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2</sub>, IV a B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2</sub>, b B<sub>1</sub>, and B<sub>2</sub>. Measure numbers 9 through 16 are indicated at the top of the staves. The word "fine" is written at the end of the tenth staff.

# DEVIL'S DREAM

# DEVIL'S DREAM (CON'T)

VI a A1-2

B1

B2

b A'1

A'2

c A1-2

VI'd B1

e A1

A2

B1

B'2

f A1

fine

# CHINESE BREAKDOWN

# CHINESE BREAKDOWN (CONT)

III a A

b A

(II) c A

unison

III a B

b B

(II) c B

fine

1. WILD HORSE  
2. WAKE UP SUSAN

3. WAKE UP SUSAN  
4. REDBIRD

Handwritten musical notation for the first system, consisting of four staves. Each staff begins with a box containing a Roman numeral and a fraction, and a treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, slurs, and fingerings (1-5).

- Staff 1: Box VI A, fraction 1/1. Fingering: 3, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.
- Staff 2: Box IA, fraction 2/1. Fingering: 3, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.
- Staff 3: Box IIA, fraction 3/1. Fingering: 3, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.
- Staff 4: Box VIA, fraction 4/1. Fingering: 3, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.

Handwritten musical notation for the second system, consisting of four staves. Each staff begins with a box containing a Roman numeral and a fraction, and a treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, slurs, and fingerings (1-5).

- Staff 1: Box VI B, fraction 1/1. Fingering: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.
- Staff 2: Box IB, fraction 2/1. Fingering: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.
- Staff 3: Box IIA, fraction 3/1. Fingering: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.
- Staff 4: Box IIB, fraction 4/1. Fingering: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.

APPENDIX

Transcriptions

White River Bottoms . . . 14	Wild Horse . . . . . 20
Devil’s Dream. . . . . 16	Wake Up Susan. . . . . 20
Chinese Breakdown . . . . 18	Redbird . . . . . 20

Key

	pitch a quarter tone low	strain and repeat, only variations transcribed in repeat
	Finger slides up to note	
I, II, IV	occasion/performance	A1,B2 strain and time through
a, b, c	repeat of tune	'a', 'b' phrase

Table of Performances

- Ken Smelser - fiddle, recorded . . .
- I. 1966; Art Rosenbaum or Pat Dunford - guitar. Recorded by Rosenbaum
  - II. June 16, 1980; Mary Ruth Riley - fiddle, P. Tyler - guitar, Brad Leftwich - banjo, banjo uke, and fiddle.
  - III. Mary 15, 1981; Mary Ruth Riley - fiddle, Carmen Walker - guitar; Recorded at Bedford Middle School, Bedford, Indiana by David A. Brose.
  - IV. May 17, 1981; David Brose - banjo.
  - V. July 17, 1981; Maurice “Mousy” Wininger - piano, Paul Tyler - fiddle and guitar. Recorded at Mr. Wininger’s home in Paoli, Indiana by David A. Brose.
  - VI. Nov. 27, 1981; Brad Leftwich - banjo, fiddle, and guitar, Paul Tyler - fiddle and guitar.

All recordings made at Ken Smelser’s home in Paoli, indiana by Paul Tyler, except as noted.

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