

The True Story of “Dickey’s Discovery” Thoughts on Lotus Dickey’s Fiddling

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Paul lived in Bloomington for eight years, and played with Lotus for much of that time. “Lotus knew where the key was hidden at my house in Bloomington. He would have the Greyhound bus driver leave him at the corner,” says Paul. “He knew that he was welcome and he would let himself in.”

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My memories of hearing Lotus Dickey play for the first time are quite vivid. Confident that his songwriting was his greatest musical gift, he opened his set at the 1981 Indiana Fiddlers’ Gathering at Battle Ground with his movingly universal “Such a Long Time, Old Friend.” In his later years Lotus received great acclaim for his original songs. But old-time fiddling was always a heart-felt love. So in that first appearance of his on the folk circuit, he followed his opening song with a medley of two fiddle tunes, grouped by the convenience of their titles: “Paddy on the Handcar” and “Paddy on the Turnpike.”¹ As I became more involved with Lotus over the next few years, these two “Paddies” came to epitomize for me his fiddle repertoire. But I’ll continue with that story after you’ve been introduced to a few basic facts about the life of Quinten Lotus Dickey, who passed away on Thanksgiving Day 1989.²

Born in Muncie, Indiana, on December 28, 1911, Lotus Dickey moved with his family to the southern part of the state when he was only a few months old. The youngest of five children, he grew up on a small Orange County farm on Grease Gravy Road, several miles outside of Paoli, the county seat. Singing was a regular activity in the Dickey household, and provided Lotus with a solid, though informal, musical training. There were several traditional treasures in his family’s repertoire of songs. From his parents, Lotus learned such ballads as “MacDonald of Glencoe” [“The Pride of Glencoe”] and “I’ll Hang My Harp on the Willow Tree,” that may have come from England with his great-great-grandfather in the eighteenth century. Others, such as “Barbara Allen,” could have come north in the early nineteenth century when his great-grandfather brought the family by covered wagon out of the Carolinas to western Ohio. And perhaps his grandfather or father learned Stephen Foster’s “Farewell to Old Tennessee” [“Farewell, My Lilly Dear”] or the jubilant “Nicodemus” back when they were new songs in the years around the Civil War.

The Dickey family’s singing tradition grew with Lotus’s generation as they added to the already sizable store a number of new popular songs, such as “Gallagher and Sheehan” from vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley’s “Girl of My Dreams.” Then in the 1930s, when the family purchased a battery-powered radio, Lotus learned country songs like “Columbus Stockade Blues” and Uncle Dave Macon’s “I’m Gwine Back to Dixie” by listening to Saturday night broadcasts of the Grand Ole Opry from Nashville.

His life replete with song, it was only natural for Lotus to compose his own lyrics and melodies. By anyone’s standards, he was a prolific songwriter, even if you count only the songs he deemed good enough to share with others. His output is wide ranging, covering his memories (“Those Hills of Home”), his experiences (“The Spirit of St. Louis”), his worldview (“Go Hoe Hard Your Garden”), Bible stories (“David Loved Bathsheba”), love (“The Very First Time”), family values (“Hush While the Little Ones Sleep”), and current issues (“Has Heaven Gone and Left the Door Ajar?”).³

Yet in the midst of this abundance of song, Lotus also made his mark as a dance fiddler. When Lotus

was 8 years old, his brother Cyprian, eight years his senior, told their father, "If I had a fiddle, I could learn to play it." Marion Dickey complied, and soon the two brothers were learning on a mail order violin from Sears, Roebuck and Company. Lotus started out noting tunes by using just the index finger of his left hand, until he noticed that the older fiddlers in the community used three or four fingers.

Through the years, since he first began performing in 1922, Lotus has been much more of a public player than has Cyprian. Both were working men—Cyprian, a farmer; Lotus, a farmer, factory worker, and laborer. Besides playing for local square dances, county fairs, and fiddle contests all over southern Indiana and northern Kentucky, Lotus made several attempts to succeed in the world of country music. A cursory audition for the Grand Ole Opry—which he was granted in the 1960s after hitchhiking to Nashville—did not succeed, but he did sell several of his songs to the Wilburn Brothers, one of which ("God Made Woman for the Man") was recorded.

Then came his "discovery" by the folk and old-time music communities, and his late-life career in music, which his children have proclaimed the happiest years of his life. During the first four years of this newfound fame, the fiddling that Lotus presented on stage, at dances, and in countless jam sessions was heartily performed, but somewhat limited. Oh, there were his distinctive versions of standards (like "Billy in the Lowground" and "Opera Reel"), a few unusual pieces ("The Baltimore" was an early signature piece of his, passed over by us revivalists), and occasional fleeting hints of a deeper past. There were also stories about Poindexter Ainsworth, the "Arkansas man" whose playing and gracious manner in music sessions Lotus admired so greatly. But his repertoire, at that time, sprang largely from two sources, which brings us back to the two "Paddies."

"Paddy on the Handcar" came out of one of the tune books cherished through the years by Lotus and Cyprian.⁴ It was evident they had painstakingly combed these books, each in his own manner. Cyprian, a better sight-reader, liked to sample tunes and had a special fondness for polkas and waltzes, as well as for early twentieth-century pop songs for which he had piles of sheet music. Lotus's preferences ran to reels and hornpipes.⁵ He carefully selected the choicest ones (such as "Green Fields of America" and "New Century Hornpipe") and reforged them with the fire he imparted to all his breakdowns.

"Paddy on the Turnpike," on the other hand, came from Lotus's great source of fiddling inspiration, Fiddlin' Arthur Smith of Grand Ole Opry fame. As a young man, Lotus waited eagerly by the radio each Saturday to hear Smith's segment on the Opry. Besides learning a number of tunes ("Goin' to Town," "Blackberry Blossom," and "Katy Hill," to name a few), Lotus found in Arthur Smith a model for the smooth bow work with precise rhythmic kicks that made his own fiddling so eminently danceworthy. He often recounted what it was about Arthur's fiddling that grabbed him so, but this description was primarily visual and thus difficult to reproduce on paper. "He had that . . .," he would say, and then at the end of a long draw with an imaginary bow he would flick his wrist. Thus inspired by Arthur Smith, Lotus dressed up a number of his Orange County tunes by fitting in short runs where a single note had been before.⁶

There was much more yet to be unveiled about Lotus's fiddling heritage. One spring afternoon in 1985, as we were sitting in the teachers' lounge of an elementary school in Indianapolis awaiting our next assembly program, Lotus pulled out his fiddle and announced, "I woke up this morning with this tune in my head. I haven't played it or thought about it in years." He proceeded to play an unnamed D tune which he had learned sixty years previously from Albert Dougherty.⁷ This soon led to another unnamed tune, and before long the floodgates of his memory opened and Lotus guided me into another era of Hoosier fiddling. Within a week or two, we sat before a cassette tape recorder conscientiously trying—this was as much Lotus's project as mine—to catalog the old tunes that were coming back to him in droves. At that time, he recorded 34 tunes from six different Orange County fiddlers. He was also quite intent on acquainting me with the first fiddlers he has heard during his Orange County boyhood.

These men were his neighbors: Albert Dougherty, the miller; John Coulter, the storekeeper from Chambersburg; Deck Ainsworth and Allen Downey, originally from Arkansas and Illinois respectively;

Ed Fleming, the first man Lotus heard play the fiddle; George Strother, Lee Trinkle, and John Moon—farmers all. Their music was more immediate to Lotus as an aspiring young fiddler than the tunes frozen on the pages of *The Young Violinist's Favorite*. And their world was closer at hand than that of a celebrated 'Hillbilly' star from Nashville. As Lotus found out, these men knew what it took to wrest a living from the austere fields in the scenic hillsides of southern Indiana. In rediscovering these tunes in the recesses of his memory and sharing them with us, Lotus has connected us with a place and a time that exceeds even our most romantic longings for the core of tradition.⁸

The truth is, these fiddle tunes from Orange County are like Lotus Dickey himself: they fit all our concepts about tradition at the same time that they burst our favorite stereotypes. Back in 1920, when Lotus forced his fingers through the motions required for his first tune, "Don't You See My New Shoes," old-time fiddling in Indiana, as all over the continent, was a dynamic living tradition. Thanks to the efforts of George D. Hay (impresario of the Grand Ole Opry) and Henry Ford, this legacy was about to experience one of its periodic revivals.

Though fiddlers were the prevalent local entertainers in rural communities, their artistic preferences were not limited to the archaic hand-me-downs we so often equate with tradition. The popular songs of the day were just as appealing to many fiddlers' ears as were the breakdowns played at square dances. Tune books were readily available which featured turn-of-the-century compositions for polite quadrilles (from what was then the recent past) alongside mid-1980s minstrel tunes from America's first popular theater and eighteenth-century reels and hornpipes that came here with immigrants from the British Isles.

All of these musical idioms found their way to southern Indiana. John Coulter played the 1890s cakewalk "At a Georgia Camp Meeting" and other ragtime pieces, such as the unnamed rag included here. Albert Dougherty's wife Evie played second to his fiddle on their parlor organ, while they both sang popular songs and hymns alike (see "Bye-Bye My Honey, I'm Gone" and the "Holiness Piece"). Allen Downey was a good note-reader and a polished fiddler who had taken violin lessons during his boyhood in Illinois. Deck Ainsworth's march "The Baltimore" is musical evidence of his upbringing in polite society in Arkansas. Is it



Lotus at the Philadelphia Folk Festival, 1985

possible that Deck voluntarily forsook his family's reported wealth for the rough life of farming southern Indiana's hills during the Great Depression? Perhaps Deck was motivated by a back-to-the-land idealism similar to that which led Lotus's socialist-leaning father to take his family from industrial northern Indiana down to those pristine but severe hills. Whatever took Deck Ainsworth or the Dickeys to agriculturally poor Orange County, the musical culture there in the first half of this century was quite robust.⁹ These cassette albums center on the old-time fiddle tradition of that place and time, as it survived in the memory and playing of Lotus Dickey. It is fitting that the most common Orange County tune was "White River Bottoms." According to Lotus, "It's a local song from down in Orange County all the old-timers played at square dances, a good square dance piece."¹⁰ The tune is distinctively Hoosier. I've encountered it in the repertoires of four other fiddlers from southern and central Indiana. Its title gives us a reference to the places of Lotus Dickey's life. The west fork of the White River flows out of Muncie, where Lotus was born, southwest through Indianapolis and on to Petersburg where it curves to meet

the east fork. The river's east fork cradles the top of Orange County before it dips down to Shoals, where in the early '60s, Lotus was Champion Fiddler of the Martin County Fair. Yet the "White River Bottoms" does not fully characterize Lotus's life, for he was not from the rich bottom lands. Rather it was in the rugged uplands of Orange County where his musical genius sank its roots, reaching deep into the hills to nourish the blooms that I first beheld a decade ago.

Notes

1. This medley is recreated on Lotus's first cassette, *The Pride of Glencoe*.
2. Other tributes to Lotus and interpretations of his music can be found in these articles: Pete Sutherland, "A Trip with Lotus Dickey," *Sing Out!* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 12–19; Dillon Bustin, "The Virtues of Lotus Dickey," *Country Dance and Song* 20 (1990): 6–13; and Bob Lucas, "Lotus Dickey: An Appreciation," *Sing Out!* 34, no. 4 (Fall 1989).
3. Lotus's original songs are well-represented on the cassette album *The Very First Time*. That recording project was the zenith of his musical career.
4. One book came with the fiddle their father bought for them through the Sears catalog. I have examined two of their tune books, but there must have been a third. A number of tunes Lotus credited to the books are not in either A. S. Bowman's *The Young Violinist's Favorite* (Chicago, 1891) or *Harding's Collection of Jigs, Reels, & c.* (New York, 1929 [1891]).
5. Both seemed to ignore the many jigs contained in the books.
6. A good example on this tape is "Pegleg"; Lotus once showed me how he and Cyprian received it as a rather square piece built around arpeggios. The melody heard here is more of a quickly flowing stream of notes.
7. "Albert Dougherty D Tune #1" can be heard on Volume II of this set.
8. Who can top Lotus's story of Socrates Drum, a fiddler of the preceding generation who lived in nearby Little Africa, a settlement of freed slaves? He reportedly once ran all the way to the Ohio River—a distance equal to several marathons.
9. Cyprian Dickey even organized a string ensemble to play the classics. [See Bustin, p. 12.]
10. "White River Bottoms" can be heard on *The Pride of Glencoe*, as well as on Volume II of this set.

