

# Lone Star State of Mind

David Wallace offers seven steps  
to Texas-style fiddle

BY JAMES REEL

**T**RY TO LISTEN TO RECORDINGS OF MARK O'CONNOR when he was a youngster on the competition circuit without swaying or tapping any parts of your body. Then check out some old mono recordings by such fiddlers as Benny Thomasson and Eck Robertson—players that had an influence on O'Connor (Thomasson was his early fiddling mentor). If you've never heard this kind of music before, you might be a little perplexed. It's clearly based on old-time fiddling styles, kind of jazzy, a little like bluegrass, but not quite any of those things.

You've just discovered Texas-style fiddling, a wonderfully free and easy music despite its having been developed specifically to be played at contests. Oh, sure, you can get into all the finger-twisting variations you want, but even then, Texas fiddling never really sashays far from the dance floor.

Inspired initially by the Georgia fiddling-contest music of the 1910s and '20s, the Texas style comes in all sorts of flavors: breakdowns, the show-off variation form on traditional tunes; slow and lyrical waltzes; polkas, either slowish and heavy in the Bohemian style or fast in the Canadian manner; schottisches, the German take on Scottish music; rags, which cut loose a little more freely than the Scott Joplin-era piano ragtime that inspired them; swing tunes, jazz standards played in Texas-fiddle style; and much more.

The basics of the style include a swinging backbeat, lots of slides (but fewer than bluegrass), plenty of ornaments (not as quick as but sassier than Celtic), rich bass lines inspired by jazz, and smooth and liquid bowing.

You don't have to be from Texas to play Texas-style fiddling (although it does help you win contests in the Lone Star State). But it doesn't hurt. Consider David Wallace.

Now he's a full-fledged New Yorker who teaches at Juilliard, but he came out of Texas from a family that traces its roots back to a signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence. Wallace grew up fluent in classical as



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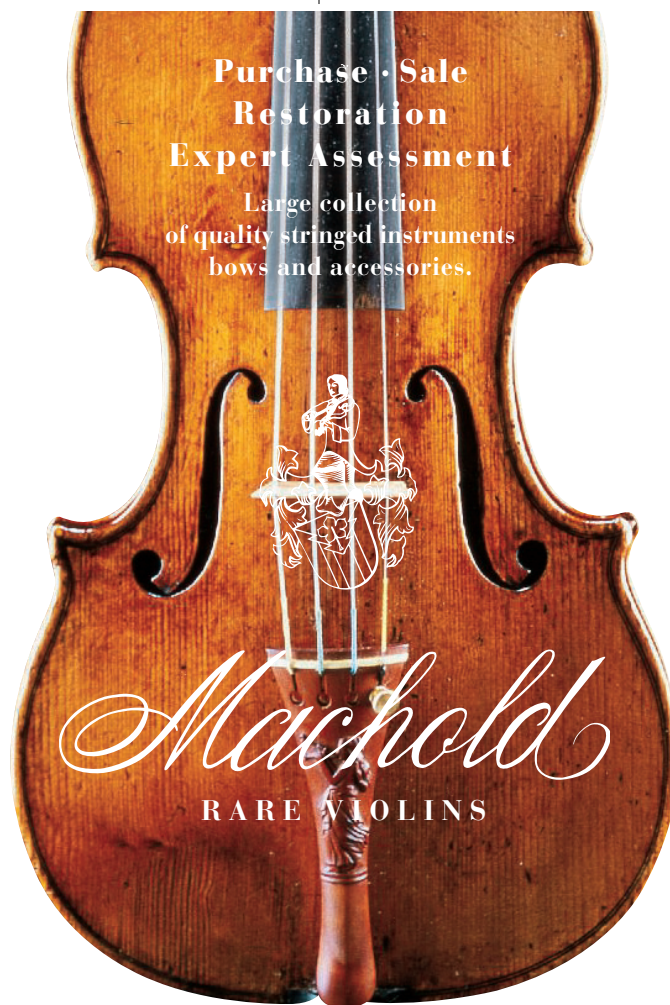
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## strings 101

well as fiddling styles, and now spends much of his time extolling the virtues of Texas fiddling in performances and workshops around the country. With a DMA from Juilliard, sometimes he can't help billing himself as Doc Wallace. Whatever you call him, he's the man to ask for advice if you want to improvise fluently in the Texas style.

This doctor is definitely in, melding Texas fiddle with jazzy New York attitude and energy on the CD *The Doc Wallace Trio, Live at the Living Room* (available by emailing docwallacetrio@aol.com). A transcription of Wallace's breakdown version of "I'll Fly Away" appears on pages 28–29.

### SEVEN STEPS

Let's assume you want to master the breakdown, the foundation of Texas-style contest fiddling, consisting of a traditional tune and a set of variations. Wallace suggests seven steps.

First, learn the basic two-part tune of the breakdown. "You need to have a sense of what the tune is before you learn the complicated versions of it," Wallace warns. "When I first learned this style, I was clueless that these meandering variations were coming from a tune."

Most Texas breakdowns, he explains, come from Irish or Scottish melodies, which are in more-or-less binary form, two repeated parts

of about eight bars each. "One of those parts is usually called the 'coarse'; it's the part on the lower two strings," says Wallace. "The other is the 'fine,' which is on the upper two strings. You improvise on those two different parts of the tune."

Wallace points out that most breakdowns consist of seven or eight standard variations, each highlighting a specific technique—for example, cross-rhythmic development of the tune, adding fourth-finger drones, or transposing the melody to create second- and third-position variations on the tune.

Coincidentally, you'll find seven or eight standard-variation *techniques* for a breakdown, including one variation in second position on the high or "fine" part of the tune, and a third-position variation for the low or "coarse" part.

The best way to start learning all this is by pairing a recording of the breakdown with an exact transcription of the improvisation. Wallace recommends Stacy Phillips' book *Mark O'Connor: The Championship Years* (Mel Bay Publications), which you can read while listening to O'Connor's CD of the same name (Country Music Foundation). Or pair O'Connor's *Soppin' the Gravy* (Rounder) with transcriptions by Daniel Carwile that you can download from O'Connor's website ([www.markoconnor.com](http://www.markoconnor.com)). Peter Martin has an excellent series of transcriptions in print (Petimar Press, available at [petimarpres.com](http://petimarpres.com)), and Wallace says Martin will usually make you a tape of some source recordings if you ask.

Second, learn a classic rendition of the tune exactly as an established fiddler played it. If you've got some of the materials recommended in Step One, you've probably already started doing this. Better yet, try to learn the tune from the fiddler in person, and get your questions answered along the way.

"The thinking," says Wallace, "is that you've got to know the tradition before you can vary it. Once you've done that, the best teachers of fiddlers will say, 'OK, now go make it better.' Then you come back with your own rendition of it, and they'll let you know if you're on track or going too far afield."

That's Step Three: studying lots of possible variations by other fiddlers, and combining elements of the different versions during performance. "While you're doing that," says Wallace, "let your ear spontaneously inspire you to substitute a phrase, part of a phrase, or even a beat."

Wallace stresses that you should study multiple renditions of the same tune, so you don't wind up merely imitating a single fiddler's work. Wallace might start by listening to a

recording by Benny Thomasson—who almost single-handedly started pioneering the Texas style in the 1920s and reached his peak in the '50s—then look into a more recent version by Dale and Terry Morris (for a list of complete recordings, email dtmorris@compuwise.net).

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"Then I'd learn other licks from jam sessions and recordings, and eventually I'd put together my own version with my own ideas, but grounded in these others," he explains. "It's important to have a point of origin, but still put your individual spin on it."

Fourth, determine the underlying melodic skeleton of the variations, the most essential notes in the tune off which you can hang vari-

ations. "In 'Blackberry Blossom,' that would be the descending scale of G, F#, E, and D," says Wallace. "That's the skeleton, and you can embellish that with triplets, arpeggios, all sorts of things. Just find the *fundamental* melody behind the notes, and figure out how to play around it."

So much for the melody. In the fifth step, it's time to analyze the harmonies. Wallace suggests playing the chord progression on guitar or mandolin, then auralizing the progression as you play the tune. "That helps you feel where you are in the form," says Wallace. "The Texas-style progressions usually have a walking bass, and it's really driving to the cadence. It outlines the phrase structure so clearly, and the more you have the harmony and the rhythm in your consciousness, the better you know where you are and the better you can keep your variations in line with what's going on. You don't want to play an extra bar in your variation that doesn't belong there."

"You have to stick more or less to the structure or shape of the tune."

Sixth, play the tune in a jam session, and steal other fiddlers' ideas by watching their licks and listening closely when it's their turn to play. "The Texas style really comes from the

jam-session culture," says Wallace. "In some ways, that's the best part of these fiddle contests, people sitting under a shade tree and passing a tune back and forth. A number of fiddlers don't care about the contest; the jam session is what it's about. That's where the tunes get stretched farther than they might on a contest stage. These jams can go on all night."

Finally, it's time to arrange and compose new variations that are entirely your own. "That can be done as simply as combining parts of different variations," Wallace says. "Benny Thomasson would start with one variation technique and then end with another. Sometimes he would play four bars of a variation of the coarse and then finish with the ending phrase of the fine."

"Sometimes, and this doesn't happen a whole lot, fiddlers will quote other tunes. In the breakdown 'Grey Eagle,' people started quoting 'Lime Rock' as one of the variations. Things like that just become assimilated in the tradition over time."

Work on this long enough and hard enough, and maybe someday you'll create something that will be absorbed into the Texas fiddling tradition. □



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## strings 101

## I'll Fly Away

TRADITIONAL, ARRANGED BY DAVID WALLACE



This is a transcription of David Wallace's performance of the tune from the album *The Doc Wallace Trio: Live at the Living Room*. "This is actually an original breakdown in the Texas-contest style," says Wallace, "which I think will

shed light on the variation techniques, since most people know this song. The theme is presented, and then followed by three typical Texas-style variations."

—Elisa M. Welch

$\text{♩} = 108$

Fiddle



String quartet score, measures 57-124. The music is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The score is written for four staves, each representing a different string instrument. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, beams, and slurs. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 above notes. Bowing or breath marks (V) are placed above notes. Trills are marked with a 'tr' symbol. Triplets are indicated by a '3' below a group of notes. The score is divided into systems of four staves each, with measure numbers 57, 63, 69, 74, 80, 86, 91, 98, 104, 109, 117, and 124 marking the beginning of each system.