



Fiddler

Magazine

Summer 2023
Volume 31, No. 2
US \$7.00
Canada \$8.00

HANNEKE CASSEL

On Creating Infinite Brightness



Lissa Schneckenburger | Sami Braman | Ella Jordan



Fiddler Magazine

P.O. Box 554
Yorktown, VA 23690
Fiddlermag.com

Publisher: Narielle Living
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Printed in the USA
Published quarterly. ISSN 1079-9974

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Volume 31, No. 2
Cover: Hanneke Cassel
Photography by
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David Wallace

No Style Is Off Limits

Peter Anick

For career-minded string players seeking a well-rounded education with exposure to many musical genres, Boston's Berklee College of Music is often at the top of the list. Long known for its jazz and contemporary music instruction, Berklee's String Department has also earned a reputation for generating top-notch bluegrass, old-time, and world music bands. For the last nine years, David Wallace has served as chair of the string department, and it is an understatement to say he is "leading by example." His performing projects run the gamut from Texas-style fiddling to free jazz, from electric viola to classical chamber music. His credits as educator are equally broad, including years of teaching at Juilliard, Mark Wood's Rock Orchestra camp,

and Mark O'Connor's fiddle camps.

David sees his eclectic style as a direct result of childhood influences. "I think part of it had to do with growing up in Texas. Both my parents were from Texas, and both had ties to the urban as well as rural. A lot of the songs that my mom sang to me and my sister... were Leadbelly songs, which were part of the vernacular. My father was a huge Bob Wills fan and into Western swing. He bought an eight-dollar fiddle when he was in college, and he's left-handed, so he strung it up left-handed and was self-taught. He was also a guitarist. My dad would sing classic Hank Williams, Jimmie Rodgers, and those kinds of things.

I was also a kid in the seventies when there was a huge ragtime revival.

You heard it everywhere, and I wanted to play it. I loved the syncopations, and I loved [Scott] Joplin. Piano was my first instrument... that was a large part of what I [played].

My mother's parents lived in Crockett, Texas, which at the time had one of the biggest fiddle contests: the World Championship Fiddler's Festival. I grew up going and listening. A lot of times Dale Morris Senior and "Texas Shorty" Chancellor vied for one and two, and Michael Weise, who later became my teacher, was often in the top three as well.

My sister and I studied with [Michael] and then started to compete. I had a fantastic public school strings program, and I grew up in an environment where a lot of

people just said yes to music.

When I went to University of Houston to study violin, I put fiddling aside and focused on classical studies. Whenever I'd go home, my dad would get his guitar and we'd play, so fiddling never totally disappeared.

I started playing viola my senior year of college, and I loved that it was a lot less standardized than the violin. There were no two violas that played alike. It seemed like there was a lot more creative freedom. Plus, there's that ability in ensembles to really support other people and make them sound better, provide a foundation.

When I went to New York, I started to collaborate with composers, working with people in Broadway, in a lot of different styles, or improvising music for plays. I moved to Brooklyn in 1997, and I happened to move to the same block as Leroy Jenkins, who was kind of the father of free jazz violin and viola and had been involved with the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. I took lessons from Leroy and learned this free improvisation approach. I worked a couple of times with [saxophonist] Ornette Coleman, who was also part of the free jazz circuit, and I wasn't aware he was a violinist. Like my dad, he played left-handed. We were proofing the parts for his piece "Skies of America". During a break, he was playing and noodling on someone's violin. The riffs he played were iconic as well as strange. I knew of his impact and his earlier albums, "Free Jazz" and "The Shape of Jazz to Come" and how those were part of a change in jazz improvisation. That sent me in that direction.

Another big game changer was getting involved in the Mark O'Connor fiddle camps. I had a bachelor's degree at University of Houston, a master's degree at Mannes College of Music, and then I did a postgraduate certificate at Juilliard before I entered the doctoral program. But after one year at Juilliard, I had major burnout.

I quit playing for a while because I needed to clear my head.

When I started playing fiddle again, the joy of making music returned. By that point, I had entered the doctoral program and one of the requirements was to give a scholarly lecture and performance on a topic. I decided this was either going to be the biggest mistake in my academic career or the best thing I would do. I gambled and did my lecture performance on Texas-style fiddling.

My dad played with me. It was a high-pressure thing, and at that time Juilliard was not necessarily wide open to any style. They're not Berklee. But it

**"When I started playing
fiddle again, the joy of making
music returned."**

went really well. It was my best attended performance at Juilliard. A lot of people were closeted fiddlers who came up to me later and said, 'I grew up playing fiddle contests.' After the recital, the head of the doctoral committee said, 'You've got to write your dissertation on this.' I had a passion to look at it with a scholarly lens. Matt Glazer had written a master's thesis at Tufts called "Controlled Improvisation in Texas-style Fiddling: Benny Thomasson and Mark O'Connor Play Grey Eagle." It was about the performance, practice, and the history of Texas fiddling, and there were about 75 pages of transcriptions.

[From the] transcriptions, I developed an understanding of Texas breakdown fiddling. I listened to these great fiddlers slowed down and understood the timing, felt the bowing. They had very different approaches. I did about three different versions of Sally Johnson: Eck Robertson's recording from the early twenties,

the video of Dick Barrett and Benny Thomasson trading it off, and Jimmie Don Bates' tie-breaker winning performance at the 1997 Weiser Idaho Grand Nationals championship. There were different bowings according to generation. Eck's were very old-timey, with a little more Georgia shuffle. You had a lot more pattern bowings. With Dick and Benny, very smooth, lots of slurs, unpredictable, unpatterned slurs. And with Jimmie Don, a lot more separate bows and kind of more driving, but again still a few slurs here and there."

Sometimes I think I have the bowing down, and when I listen to it again, I change my mind. Did you find that? Or did heuristics help you disambiguate things?

"I'd say both. With Eck Robertson, if you slow him down, you can get a clean take on it. But someone like Benny, sometimes it's six of one, half a dozen. In the video, occasionally there'd be a five-note slur or something you were not expecting, and you'd have to see it to believe it. Bowing is part of your improvisation and part of your phrasing and part of your style."



Photo Credit Christopher Davis

Texas contest-style fiddling is no longer primarily for dancing. How would you define what the goals are of Texas-style fiddling, in terms of what makes it “good”?

“There’s a drive and a time to it. It’s not like bluegrass where you’re on the front of the beat and it’s pushing forward. There’s a power to the sound where it doesn’t fluctuate a lot dynamically, at least on the breakdowns, and I think that also makes it good. Creativity plays a high role in terms of what’s respected in breakdown fiddling. When I was younger and competing, one reason I never beat someone like Matt Hartz was that he improvised a lot, whereas I worked from having learned iconic and important renditions and mixing and matching them. That’s different from on the fly stretching a tune out or taking it places. But it wasn’t like Texas swing or bluegrass, where you would go free with a solo or play the changes. It’s improvising a new melody around an existing melody. Creativity goes a long way in terms of respect. Timing, groove, and overall attitude performing.

I’d introduced myself [to Mark O’Connor] when I was researching the fiddle stuff. When he was back in New York, we talked a lot more. He asked me to teach at his camp in Tennessee in 2002. And from that point to 2014, I taught at his camps most summers. It was kind of fun because I never knew what he’d have me teach, so I’d bring my violin and viola.

Those were magical times for the fiddle camps because you had Jeremy Kittel as a teenager, Alex Hargreaves as a teenager, the Haas sisters. Just seeing this whole generation learning music from all these different people and all these different styles that really impacted a generation. The other thing I appreciated about it was that I had encountered a fair amount of sectarianism when I was a kid... the bluegrassers didn’t really want to have anything to do with the contest-style players and vice versa. But it felt like with the fiddle camps, a lot of barriers came down.

What’s beautiful about Berklee is

most musicians who come to Berklee are already multi-style players. They’re not exclusively classical or fiddle or jazz, but they play in a Celtic band, they’re in their youth symphony, and they’re listening to hip hop. There’s an understanding of, ‘I’m a musical citizen of the world. Therefore, I participate in all of this.’

Haydn or Bach or the classical giants had to play more than one instrument. They had to be able to improvise and arrange. They had to be knowledgeable about world styles or various ensembles. And that’s how you had the gig at the court or the church or whatever. So in some ways, by bringing folk traditions to the fore, by bringing improvisation to the fore, it is getting back to a broader, more total definition of musicianship.”

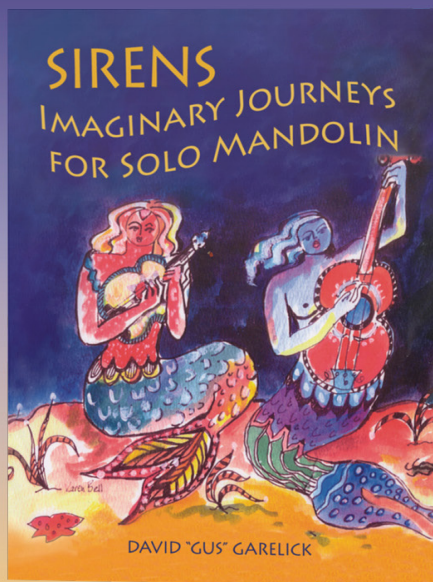
Sounds like you’ve got a great job. I imagine you’re still enjoying it after nine years.

“I’m incredibly blessed. I have the best people, human beings as well as musicians, working with me on the faculty. I’ve got incredibly committed and engaged and diverse students.”

Visit docwallacemusic.com for more information on David’s projects, publications, and performances.

Peter Anick is the co-author of Mel Bay’s “Old Time Fiddling Across America.” He plays fiddle and mandolin with the New England bluegrass band Wide Open Spaces.

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