

Ridin' Old Paint: Documenting the Canadian River Breaks Fiddle Tradition

By Andy Wilkinson

I did the best part of my growing up and got the best part of my education around the cowboys in the Canadian River Breaks of Texas. We lived on a relatively small outfit, but we were surrounded by the big outfits—the Bivins Coldwater Cattle Company, the Killgores, the upper Matadors down the road. When we went to Channing to get supplies cowboys still tethered their horses and walked the short main street, and the air was filled with the sound of spurs jingling in unison with the clop of boot heels on the old boardwalk where the cowboys strolled in full regalia. When I was very young I thought of these cowboys as gods and wanted to walk and talk like them, be like them, know and live by their ways.

The Breaks were full of music. My four sisters sang like angels in the shape-note harmonies of the old gospel music. I would discover that there were many fine musicians, poets and even laymen scholars steeped in the classics among the cowboys. We were Primitive Baptists and I was in my teens before I could devise my itinerary in such a way that I could go to the cowboy dances. I had already learned from them some of the old songs, but when I heard their string band ensembles playing the old fiddle music, I knew I would always be a better listener than performer.

*There are still cowboys in the Breaks who perform the old string music wonderfully...
Buck Ramsey, 1997*

Though he died shortly after he'd written those words and long before he'd gathered all the pastures in the vast country he'd marked as his own, Buck Ramsey numbers among the very best of the singers and poets of the cowpunch revivalist movement. "Anthem," the prologue to "Grass," his epic poem of the cow country, is already regarded by scholars and cowboys alike as one of the classic works of the genre, and his few recordings have set a high mark for those who would sing the cowboys' song. He had a brilliant and expansive mind that formed and shaped his own works, but what truly sets him apart from the remainder of the outfit is his unabashed admiration for the genuine, and the humility which such admiration engendered within him.

Not long before his untimely death, Buck had conspired with Charlie Seemann—then with the Fund for Folk Culture in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and now director of the Western Folklife Center in Elko, Nevada—to document the musicians that had earliest inspired him, the cowboy fiddlers of the Canadian River Breaks of Texas. Through the Fund for Folk Culture, a grant was secured from the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Community Folklife

Program, and Buck set out a plan to record the fiddle players from the Breaks who still lived, worked, and made music in that country. Buck planned to play guitar with them, and sing on such tunes that required it. The Smithsonian agreed to send their Grammy Award-winning recording engineer, Pete Reiniger, to handle the technical side of things, and arrangements were made to do the recording in the old adobe-walled Tascosa School House, an historic venue for the music where its originators had once played community dances and is now fully restored as an integral part of Cal Farley's Boys Ranch, the charitable institution that grew up on the site of one of the toughest towns in the old West.

Buck had lined up the fiddlers, cowpunchers who still worked the range and still played the old tunes, all of them cultural descendants of the titans of the Texas fiddle tradition—Eck Robertson and Jess Morris. Among them were Frankie McWhorter, brothers Bobby and Fred Thompson and Fred's son Tybo, Karen Walters, the renowned Mayfields (brothers Herb and Smokey, and son and nephew Clint), and Jess Morris's great-

West Texas Fiddlers and the B

nephew, Rooster Morris. Besides Buck, they were to be backed-up on guitar by Dale Burson, Ivan Cates, and Glen Spiller.

But Buck died before the project could get underway, and I was asked to see it through to conclusion. So early in 1998, we began with a week-long recording session where Buck had wished it done, at the historic school house on the Canadian River. Pete Reiniger brought his digital recording equipment from the nation's capitol, and over several days we were able to capture a number of excellent tracks from all but one of the performers on Buck's list, including the welcome surprise of having a drop-in guest performer, one of the Texas Panhandle's best fiddle stylists, Alvin Crow.

We were missing Frankie McWhorter, who had recently suffered injuries from a horse-wreck, and, compounded with surgery for other problems with his fiddlin' limbs, was unable to participate. As he had a central role in the project, Pete mixed what we had, and we put completion of the project on hold until Frankie could get healed up and haired over. It wasn't until the following year that I was able to take some recording equipment to his camp house in Lipscomb County. After gathering cattle all day, Frankie pulled out his fiddle and set down the tracks that can be heard on this project.

In the meantime, Charlie Seemann located several old recordings of Jess Morris, made by John Lomax in 1941. Also, Don Champlin and Lillian Turner unearthed some recorded comments that Buck had made during a session at one of the Cowboy Songs and Range Ballads festivals, held annually at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming. We reprocessed parts of both of these recordings for inclusion in the project.

While all that was brewing, Joe Carr—one of the bright lights in acoustic music and one of its ablest historians—had been rummaging around in the Southwest Collection at Texas Tech University and had come across handwritten scores of two of Jess Morris's original, unrecorded compositions. Since Jess had written the arrangements for piano and fiddle, that's the way we elected to do them, enticing Karen Walters to play the fiddle part (which we recorded on her ranch just south of the Canadian River) and Rusty Hudelson to do the piano (which we recorded at my studio in Lubbock). To finish up the project, Charlie Seemann put together notes and comments about the songs, a well-known pastel artist from that country (Pernie Fallon) was commissioned to do an original painting of the Breaks to illustrate the cover, and the whole works came together by the end of last year.

Because we wanted to share this music and its history with a wide variety of people, we began to search for a suitable way to announce the completion of the project. We had considered several predictable venues for debuting the recording—such as cowboy music gatherings, or those devoted to bluegrass or country-western—but because Texas fiddle music has had far-reach-

ing impact on several musical genres, we chose, instead, to premiere this documentary album in a place dedicated to promoting the history of America's most vibrant music crossroads, the place where fiddle music and country music and rhythm and blues music all came together to emerge as part of the foundation of rock and roll: The Buddy Holly Center.

The Buddy Holly Center in Lubbock, Texas, opened its doors in September of 1999. Housed in the city's remodeled and expanded historic Fort Worth and Denver Railroad depot, it has a broad mission in the arts of the region of the Llano Estacado. As its name suggests, it is first and foremost the principal site for commemorating what is arguably the region's most famous musician. It features an extensive collection of Buddy Holly memorabilia, including artifacts owned



Photos Courtesy of The Buddy Holly Center, Lubbock

by the City of Lubbock as well as many in private ownership but on loan for the permanent exhibit on his life and music. Tuesdays through Saturdays, visitors can see Buddy's Fender Stratocaster guitar, his trademark horn-rimmed glasses, and a songbook that he and The Crickets used in their performances. The collection also features clothing, photographs, recording contracts, tour itineraries, and even Buddy's homework assignments.

The Center also hosts a wide range of changing exhibits in the visual arts in three additional galleries. Past shows, for example, have included: "Y2Klay," contemporary ceramic works created in celebration of the new millennium; "Full Deck Quilts," a traveling exhibition of 54 fine art quilts representing a full deck of cards; and "Celebracion," the Center's annual invitational exhibition featuring works centered around the history and meaning of the Day of the Dead, done by artists from across the nation. Before the year is out, it will also host "State of the Blues," an exhibition of Jeff Dunas's powerful, yet intimate, large-format Iris print photographs, portraits of the men and women who are living legends of the Delta blues; alongside these portraits, Dunas has documented the landmark juke joints and byways of the Blues Highway, a heritage trail that runs from New Orleans through the Mississippi Delta to Chicago. A fourth gallery, the Texas Musicians Hall of Fame, features changing exhibitions and programs on the music and music history of Texas and West Texas.

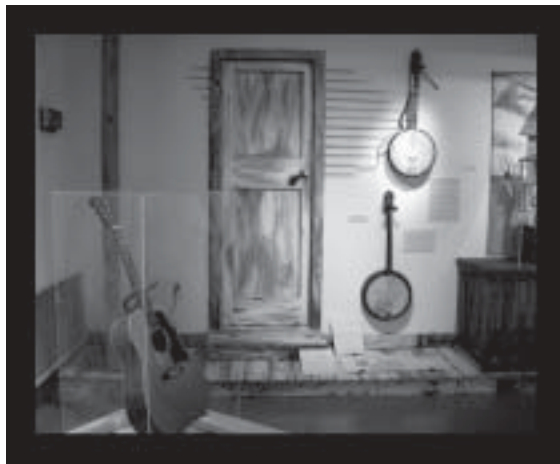
The Buddy Holly Center also has a series of music education and outreach programs, which include a full slate of live performances in its outdoor courtyard each summer. The popularity of

Buddy Holly Center

these programs, and their focus on the music and musicians of the Llano Estacado, has made it the venue of choice for the releasing of new recordings and for the debuting of new performances. It seemed a natural choice for celebrating the music that powered much of the Texas fiddle tradition, a music born and bred in the environs of the Texas Panhandle.

Until the exhibit comes down at the end of May, visitors can segue from Buddy's Stratocaster-driven rock-and-roll to the fiddle-driven music of the Canadian River Breaks, simply by walking from the sock hop and roller rink and Surf Ballroom milieu of the Buddy Holly Permanent Exhibit to the ranch house front porch in the Texas Musicians Hall of Fame.

The Center's designers fastened on the notion of the front porch as a focal point of the exhibit because such places were not only where rural music was created and enjoyed, but also where the travelling guest was first welcomed. Lubbock artist John Chinn was commissioned to build a replica porch that



Photos Courtesy of The Buddy Holly Center, Lubbock

would make the visitor feel at home, while still serving as a showcase for the artifacts on loan to the exhibit, things such as Jess Morris's original hand-written scores and a half-dozen instruments intimately related to the music of the Canadian River Breaks. After the welcoming ambiance of the porch, the walls of the gallery first lead the visitor to a display of photographs depicting a century's worth of music along the Breaks, and then on to the side of the room opposite the porch, crafted into a Wall of Fame honoring

the major influences of this fiddle tradition.

The Buddy Holly Center is open Tuesday through Friday 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and Saturday, 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. It is closed Sundays and Mondays. The Buddy Holly Center is located on the corner of 19th Street and Avenue G in Lubbock. For more information, call (806) 767-2686, or check out www.buddyhollycenter.org. ■

51

If you'd like more information about the compact disk recording of *Ridin' Old Paint: Documenting the Canadian River Breaks Fiddle Tradition*, you can contact the Buddy Holly Center or the National Ranching Heritage Center, both in Lubbock, Texas; the Western Folklife Center in Elko, Nevada; or one of several online services (Laid-Back West at www.laid-back.com, the Western Folklife Center at www.westfolk.org, or Grey Horse Press at www.grey-horse.com). It is worth noting that this is a non-profit endeavor, with net proceeds to go to the Buck Ramsey Memorial Fund at the Western Folklife Center in Elko, Nevada.

The recording was engineered by Pete Reiniger, of the Smithsonian Institute, was produced by Andy Wilkinson. It was funded by the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Community Folklife Program, administered by the Fund for Folk Culture. Local administration was by the Lubbock Arts Alliance.

Following is a listing of the tunes and the performers:



1. "Ridin' Old Paint and Leadin' Old Ball," Jess Morris (Jess Morris), 6:22.
2. "XIT Ranch Cowboy Polka," Karen Walters, fiddle; Rusty Hudelson, piano (Jess Morris), 3:07.
3. "Taters In the Sandy Land," Frankie McWhorter, 1:56.
4. "Crippled Turkey," Frankie McWhorter, 0:46.
5. "The Waltz of Wolf Creek," Frankie McWhorter ([c] Frankie McWhorter), 1:32.
6. "Canadian River Waltz," Fred Thompson, fiddle; Tybo Thompson, guitar; Ivan Cates, guitar ([c] Fred Thompson and Buck Ramsey), 2:16.
7. "Tennessee Wagoner," Rooster Morris, fiddle; Dale Burson, guitar; Ivan Cates, guitar, 1:45.
8. "When You and I Were Young, Maggie," Rooster Morris, fiddle; Dale Burson, guitar; Ivan Cates, guitar, 2:42.
9. "Prettiest Girl In the County," Frankie McWhorter, 1:45.
10. "Ten Pretty Girls," Rooster Morris, fiddle; Glen Spiller, fiddle; Ivan Cates, guitar; Dale Burson, guitar, 3:27.
11. "Rye Waltz," Rooster Morris, fiddle; Glen Spiller, fiddle; Ivan Cates, guitar; Dale Burson, guitar, 1:49.
12. "Uncle Tommy," Rooster Morris, fiddle; Glen Spiller, fiddle; Ivan Cates, guitar; Dale Burson, guitar, 2:13.
13. "Big Country," The Mayfields (Herb, mandolin; Smokey, fiddle; Clint, guitar), 1:36.
14. "El Rancho Grande XIT Schottische," Karen Walters, fiddle; Rusty Hudelson, piano (Jess Morris), 3:02.
15. "Pan-Tex Polka," Alvin Crow, fiddle; Ivan Cates, guitar ([c] Alvin Crow), 1:56.
16. "Amazing Grace," Karen Walters, fiddle; Glen Spiller, guitar, 2:00.
17. "Ridin' Old Paint and Leadin' Old Ball," Rooster Morris, fiddle and vocal; Dale Burson, guitar, 5:06.