



PROJECT MUSE®

Music in the Air Somewhere: The Shifting Borders of West Virginia Fiddle and Song Traditions (review)

Mark Payne

West Virginia History: A Journal of Regional Studies, New Series,
Volume 1, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 109-110 (Review)

Published by West Virginia University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wvh.2008.0009>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/236018>

Music in the Air Somewhere: The Shifting Borders of West Virginia Fiddle and Song Traditions. By Erynn Marshall. (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2006. Pp. 200.)

Erynn Marshall's *Music in the Air Somewhere* examines the repertoires and styles of seven elder central West Virginia fiddlers and singers. Some of the musicians in the study, such as Melvin Wine and Woody Simmons, are well known in West Virginia fiddling circles and beyond. Others like Leland Hall and Lester McCumbers might be less familiar to those who are not students of old-time fiddling. Of the women included in the study, Rita Emerson and Phyllis Marks are best known for their singing, while Linda McCumbers sings and plays guitar. Brief profiles are included for each of the musicians studied and their early influences. These are presented with obvious respect by the author and contain interesting anecdotes and interview excerpts.

One of the strengths of Marshall's book is that it scratches the surface of the woefully understudied role of women in West Virginia traditional music. A couple of interesting gender-related issues are explored. The author suggests that women who played fiddle, banjo, guitar, or who sang typically did not do so at public gatherings because early-to mid-twentieth-century codes of conduct did not look upon such behavior as "proper" for women of good reputation. Women usually pursued their music in the home for their own enjoyment, to entertain children, or to relieve the tedium of work around the home and farm. The church was also an acceptable music outlet for women. This is supported by the interview comments of the women in the study.

Rarely did women have access to the public music opportunities as did men at fiddle contests, taverns, dances, weddings, barn raisings, and other community events. While early-twentieth-century social restrictions might have frowned upon women who dared to strut their musical stuff, the book points out that women were, and continue to be, made welcome by their male counterparts. As a result of the comparative lack of public exposure for many great West Virginia women fiddlers like Forest Rose Morris, Hasseltine Humphreys, Lela Gerkins, Rosa Bunner Pheasant, and Sarah Singleton, they remain largely under-documented and not as well-known as many men fiddlers who are perhaps less deserving of such recognition.

Another interesting point in the book is that, while women might have been on the outside looking in when it came to instrumental music, there are signs that the singing tradition in West Virginia has been dominated by

women. The three ladies in this study all learned to sing songs from their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, and have passed on songs to younger women in their families. When one thinks of the song tradition in this state, it is women who command the attention.

There is plenty of academic tech talk and analysis that relates to fiddling techniques. That was, frankly, the least interesting section of the book for me. The analysis of instrumental and vocal interpretations of four songs was a bit of a grind to read compared to the easy style of the rest of the book. Marshall delves at some length into an interesting chicken-egg-type question about the origin of some fiddle pieces. This basic question is whether or not some tunes that are well known and accepted as non-vocal fiddle tunes actually began as songs that were sung vocally and then evolved over time to become instrumentals custom-fit to the fiddle. There is also discussion of early fiddling styles that more closely mirrored the vocal melody lines and were sung and played simultaneously by the fiddler.

The book contains useful appendices including comprehensive repertoire lists of all the musicians in the study, a glossary of terms, bibliography, discography, and compact disc with selections by several of the musicians mentioned in the book to gain a better sense of their styles. The author is contributing proceeds from the book to the Augusta Heritage Center at Davis and Elkins College.

West Virginia has long been held in high regard by folklore and musicology types around the country as a wellspring of important traditional music. It is, perhaps, understandable that this fact is not on the radar of most West Virginians, though it should be. Our reputation as the source of some of the best acoustic music in the world is one of, if not the most, important contributions of our state to the cultural identity of America. How disappointing and curious it is that, in a place as rich in folk culture as West Virginia, not one of our colleges or universities offers a degree program in folklore, musicology, or related fields of study.

Mark Payne
West Virginia Humanities Council