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HOMEGROWN
2012
The Music of America

Traditional Ethnic and Regional Music and Dance that's "Homegrown" in Communities across the U.S.

AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

Robert Shafer, Robin Kessinger & Bobby Taylor

**Flatpick Guitar and
Fiddle Music from
Kanawha County,
West Virginia**



**Thursday
August 16, 2012
12 NOON - 1 PM**

**Coolidge Auditorium
Ground Floor, Thomas Jefferson Building
Library of Congress
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Washington, DC**

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Kanawha Tradition

Great traditional musicians leave a legacy of music attributed to them, stories about them, and most important, a group of active younger musicians who carry their music forward. Historically, traditional music was only passed from one person to another; the only proven way of maintaining the tradition. However the music does change in minor ways from one generation to the next rather than remaining a static entity. The "folk process" is in play and, over time, it tends to weed out the music of least significance. It strengthens the more artistically significant music because it is still performed and passed on by musicians whose tastes and values deem it important. In West Virginia, fiddle music is often identified with a significant musician to whom most people refer when they name the tune. They say, "It's a Henry Reed tune," or a "Melvin Wine tune," or a "Clark Kessinger tune." That older generation of musicians represent the last generation of musicians who received their music solely through family and regional sources. Their legacy lies within the artists who still play their music today.

Numerous West Virginia fiddlers had great talent and noteworthy repertoires, and have left a significant legacy. Their music is influential long after their own death. Kanawha Valley fiddler Clark Kessinger is credited with having masterful technique. Charles Wolfe said, "He ripped into a tune like a hungry man faced with a plate of fried chicken." A rare film clip from the Newport Folk Festival exhibits Clark's amazing showmanship, and this, coupled with his considerable talent, makes for an outstanding performance. Born in Charleston, West Virginia and raised on a hillside farm in Lincoln County, he was most taken by another legendary West Virginia fiddler, "Blind Ed" Haley. Clark's music was first documented from 1928 to 1931 by the fledgling commercial recording industry, not a small player in informing our historical knowledge of Appalachian music in general. Clark Kessinger was "rediscovered" and recorded again in the 1960s. By then, with modern media, his talents transcended geographical boundaries, and is represented in the repertoires of younger old-time musicians everywhere. But Clark Kessinger's legacy is still found and is perhaps strongest within the traditional boundaries of family and community.

Clark Kessinger was attracted to famous classical violinists. He met Fritz Kreisler when Kreisler performed in Charleston, and they admired each other's talent. Clark did not have strict classical technique, but he managed to get amazing tone and response from his fiddle. This is best heard in his sweet renditions of old country waltzes. He won the so-called fiddling "Championships" at the Union Grove and Galax Fiddler's Conventions. He also greatly influenced younger musicians in the Kanawha Valley.

Bobby Taylor was born in Kanawha County and is a fourth generation fiddler. He grew up within three miles of Clark Kessinger's home, and he naturally gravitated to Clark's fiddling. Clark worked as a carpenter, house painter and gardener, but he still was a fiddler of local distinction, mostly through playing for square

dances. Clark's music was highly desired by square dancers, and his early recordings included square dance calls by Ernest Legg. Bobby Taylor, a state champion fiddler, carries on the square dance tradition and regularly plays for three dances a month. After Clark had a stroke that crippled his left side, Bobby would visit Clark and note the fiddle while Clark operated the bow. In the process, Bobby experienced his "down-bow" style.

Robin Kessinger, Clark's great nephew, grew up with Clark's music and played string music with his father, Bob Kessinger. Robin's incredible musical abilities show up on a guitar rather than a fiddle. Clark's innovative techniques and musical challenges are not unlike Robin's inventive flatpick guitar style. Like Clark, Robin's musical interests sometime roam outside of traditional boundaries. Noted fiddler, "Georgia Slim" (Robert Rutland), was a Kessinger family friend, and he influenced Robin as well.

Like Robin, Robert Shafer is a National Flatpicking Champion, also from the Kanawha Valley. They both have many, many state and national awards to their credit. They enjoy trading licks and backing each other up whether it's a "Kessinger tune," a ragtime tune, or a jazz number. They delve into genres of American music that may cross traditional boundaries. They have taken the playing in new directions, all the while playing American music that fits into their acoustic repertoires. Robert Shafer is well known in the Kanawha Valley as a side man in country bands, and has played traditional and country music professionally since graduating from high school. Robin and Robert's musical creativity shows up in some of the aggressive guitar techniques they use while playing Clark's fiddle tunes.

Clark Kessinger was part of the "golden age" of old-time country music. During this period, fiddlers were experimenting with rags, blues, breakdowns, and other "hot" elements of southern black-influenced forms. Bobby Taylor attempts Clark's "triple bowing" technique on some tunes. These techniques allow for advanced syncopation and melodic variation, as well as chord progressions that may not be heard within older traditional forms, but are clearly a part of the Clark Kessinger/Kanawha tradition.

Gerald Milnes
Folk Art Coordinator
Augusta Heritage Center
Davis & Elkins College

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

