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Albert Hash – A Visit - by Harry Baya, Aug 9, 2022

It was the summer of 1980. I was divorced and living alone in an apartment in Hastings-on-Hudson, NY. I had started taking weekly fiddle lessons from an Irish fiddler sometime in the prior 12 months.

After my father retired from the army around 1962, my parents lived in Tampa, Florida, where he was born and grew up,. Most summers my mother would spend a few weeks in Abingdon, Virginia, her hometown. Some summers I would fly to Tampa and drive up to Abingdon with my parents and stay for a few days before going back to New York. That's probably why I was there in 1980.

While in Abingdon I would spend some time hanging out with my cousin Jim White. Jim was the son of my mother's brother, Bill. Bill, and his son, Jim, had spent their entire lives in Abingdon other than things like college or military service. Jim is about 13 years younger than me. I turned 41 in the summer of 1980 and Jim was around 28. We got along well. He was one of my favorite cousins from the 9 first cousins on my mother's side of the family and the seven on my father's.

Jim had a pickup truck and a dog named Weed. As a German Shepherd puppy Weed "grew like a weed" and the name stuck. On a weekend day when Jim was not working we discussed going on an outing. I had read in the local paper of a well known fiddler named Albert Hash who lived up near White Top Mountain, within an hour of Abingdon, and mentioned it to Jim. Jim said that he had heard of Albert Hash and thought he knew more or less where he lived. We decided to drive up and see if we could visit him.

We set out in the pickup truck with Weed in the back. It was a beautiful clear summer day and I don't recall that it was particularly hot. We found Albert's house and knocked on the door. Albert's wife met us at the door and invited us in. Albert was in the living room, with maybe another visitor, and we introduced ourselves, telling them that Jim was from Abingdon and I was cousin, with some Abingdon roots, visiting from the New York city area. I told them I was a fiddle student and had come to meet Albert Hash.

I am guessing that he was pleased to meet a young man from Abingdon, and an older man living in the New York City area – kind of an exotic for the White Top Mountain area. The fact that my mother was from Abingdon may have helped.

Albert's wife offered us lemonade and we each had a glass. At some point Albert arranged for his mother to join us and Jim and I were introduced. Albert asked a few questions about our lives and then asked me about my experience with the fiddle.

I told him that I was just beginning and could hardly play anything. I told him that my teacher had spent the first few weeks of my lessons teaching me to play open, unfretted strings, and that she wanted me to be able to get a nice full tone from each bow stroke.

My teacher told me that fretting could come later and that anyone could learn to finger the tunes. My teacher, Kathleen Collins, felt the sound from the bow stroke would determine whether or not I would ever be a good fiddler. This seemed to go over well with Albert. [I don't actually remember all this clearly but I think we did discuss this].

After a few minutes Albert handed me a fiddle and asked me to play something. I was not happy with this. I knew that I knew next to nothing and that Albert was a reasonably famous fiddler. He insisted.

As I recall, after a few false starts, I managed to struggle through "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star". I got a beginner's round of applause from the room and probably blushed to the roots.

It was a delightful visit with a local White Top Mountain family and I treasure that memory.

After a while Albert offered to show his workshop in the basement where he made fiddles. While we were there on or two other local men came in to see Albert. In addition to being a well known fiddle player, Albert also made and sold fiddles.

His day job was as a machinist for Raytheon in Bristol and he had used the knowledge from his work to create a small factory in the basement of his house. There were a variety of wood processing machine and tools. The room was fairly

large, probably the size of the house, maybe 60 feet by 40 feet, and was well lit, clean and well organized. There were a number of fiddles at various stages of creation.

I discussed ordering a fiddle from Albert and he said, I think, it would cost \$50. I was short on money in those days and decided it was something I could do in the future. I never did. I regret that.

Albert introduced us to his visitors and I think one or two of the men knew, or knew of, Jim's father, my Uncle Bill, who had an insurance agency in Abingdon. I was interested in the fiddle making process and learned that Albert always carved the end of the neck of the fiddle into a pattern, like a head, or an animal. I believe the fiddle he had me play on upstairs had the head of an eagle.

While we were there a man came in with a double-barrel shotgun and asked Albert if he could take a look at it. The man said he was trying to separate the barrel from the rest of the gun and trigger mechanism. Albert handled for a minute or so and handed it back to the owner. Jim said "Could I see that for a minute?". Jim took the gun and struck the end of the stock smartly on the floor. The gun clicked and Jim handed it back to the owner. The problem was fixed. The man said "How did you know what to do?" and Jim said "I have the same gun and had that same problem." Jim still has the gun. It had previously belonged to John Gwathmey, our uncle who was our cousin Harriet's father.

I think this won Albert's respect for Jim and after that he was especially friendly to us. He showed us around the tools and explained one in particular that I remember well.

The front and back of a violin are shaped surfaces.



Albert said that he had developed his own way of making those shaped pieces. I think other violin makers either hand carved the wood with hand tools and sanders or used a process to shape a flat piece of wood over a mold (probably soaking and heating the wood). Albert had a large machine that he said was

similar to one he used to work with metal in his job. This machine would duplicate the shape of a surface.

The user put a shaped surface on one side of the machine and a thick block of metal on the other. The machine brought a pointer down on the shaped side and was synched to bring a drill (or some grinding mechanism) down on the thick metal on the other side. The drill would drill into the metal till it was at the same height on the thick metal side as the height where the pointer touched the shape surface on the other side. The pointer would move around the surface of the shaped surface to be duplicated and drill out the metal on the other side so that it had the same shape.

Albert had created a similar machine that worked with wood. He would put a piece of wood with the shape of a fiddle front, or back, on one side and a block of wood on the other. He would then move the point touching the master shape and this would move the drill around so that a duplicate surface was created from the block of wood. If you watched this machine working it was fairly obvious how it worked. However, I recognize that it's somewhat difficult to describe in words.

Albert used this machine in the process of creating the shaped pieces of wood used to make fiddle fronts and backs. My understanding was that he pretty much created this machine on his own and didn't know of anyone else using a similar machine to make fiddles. I was impressed.

Albert also had an interesting story about how he selected the wood to be used to make fiddles. White Top Mountain is in a heavily forested, lightly populated, area. My cousin Jim tells me that the two most common trees on White top are the Red Spruce and the Yellow Birch. These are rare in this part of the world and more common further North, as in Maine. White Tops plant differ from those a few miles away because of its elevation. Jim's guess is that Albert used the Red Spruce trees for fiddle wood.

Albert said he would go out in the forest on a cold day, when it was below freezing, and would take a sturdy rock with him. Jim's recall was that he said he took a hammer. He would look for trees of a size to provide the wood he needed and then bang each such tree with the rock. Albert listened to the frequency with which the tree resonated and chose the one he recognized as appropriate. Jim's guess is that you would need musician's ear, or a luthier's, to identify the pitch.

He would cut a chosen tree down and drag it down the hillside to take back to his home and use for making fiddles. Getting a tree off a mountain side and back to your home is no small task. Albert Hash came from mountain stock. These were good people who have lived well in the mountains for generations. I think to them even Abingdon people were “city people”. They were part of the Appalachian culture from which so much wonderful music has come.

For some reason I have always loved this story. Both the idea that someone would use this method to select wood for a fiddle, and the vision of Albert using the rock to select trees and personally cut them down, take them home, and cut them to make fiddles, feels wonderfully earthy in some way. For me it somehow demonstrates using a direct relationship with nature to find what you need. There is nothing in my day to day life like that.

Before leaving, Jim and I mentioned that we had hoped to find some ramps while we were in the area. We were told exactly where to go and what to look for. Jim was driving and his recall was that they sent us up toward the top of White Top mountain. A few minutes later Jim drove slowly along the side of the road and we looked down the steep side of the hill for bright green shoots sticking out above other growth beneath the trees.

We saw some. We got out of the car and went down to the ramps. The ground was damp and soft and we could just pull the ramps out with no effort. We ate some on the spot. My first ramp. It’s kind of a cross between an onion and garlic and I liked it. We managed to collect a couple of pounds and took them back up to the truck. Jim put them in a burlap bag he had in the back of the truck. Ramps are quite smelly. Perhaps for that reason we put the bag of ramps in the back of the truck with Weed. That turned out to be a mistake.

When we got back to Jim’s place we found that Weed had gotten into the bag and chewed up quite a few of the ramps. The back of the truck was a smelly mess, as was Weed. We managed to salvage a few and I took some back to New York and kept them in my freezer to show and share with friends in Hastings-on-Hudson. I had put them in a paper bag in my suitcase. Ramps give off a very strong smell. Everything in suitcase smelled of ramps, and I think the suitcase had that smell for quite a while.

Perhaps I should not add the memories below, but I will type it now and delete it later if I chicken out. As I write this, it is 2022 and I am living in California. Personal use of marijuana is legal here, and as of last year it has been decriminalized in Virginia also. It was not legal anywhere in the U.S. in 1980.

Jim had some marijuana with him. After we left Albert Hash's house we pulled over and had a few puffs. I was stoned for the ramp experience and it is a vivid and charming memory.

Harry Baya August 22, 2022