

Fiddle Teachers – Harry Baya [ fiddle\_teacher\_memories. pdf ]

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The key insight that is driving me here is that I was incredibly lucky to have had the experience I had with my three fiddle teachers. What I want to express here relates to my experience with them, hearing them play, talking with them, sharing experiences with them. Though I did learn a lot, I feel that the experience of hearing their music was far more important than their impact on my playing skills.

I got to spend hundreds, all together, of hours with wonderfully talented musicians performing just for me, allowing me to interact with them ask the questions, experience trying to understand what about the music they made was so fulfilling, satisfying, inspiring and wonderful for me. I was not at a concert with hundreds, or thousands, of people enjoying a performance. I was sitting with a master performer as they played their best, just for me, and I was in a context where I listened as intensely, as intimately, as openly, as acceptingly, as I possibly could. I recorded their lessons, and studied them, and listened to them over and over, especially when I was learning a new tune...or relearning an old one.

What a gift. I did not then realize how incredibly lucky I was. I did enjoy the experience, a lot, again and again. I loved going to the classes, I loved listening to the recordings I made (and now playing some on my radio program). But I was not then aware of how utterly, words fail me, let's try "transcendent" that experience was. It was a gift from the gods and I can see it now.

I don't know that being more aware of how lucky I was would have made the experiences even better. They were absolutely wonderful even then and I am now delighted that I have become aware of how wonderful, and unique, and undeservedly lucky for me, those experiences were. I hope to contact Sam and Joy and tell them that. I will also try to contact Kathleen.

What I hope to do as I write more of this essay is to talk about each of the experiences and some of the specific memories I have. Kathleen in her home, her presence, her aura, Sam in his house, at fiddle jams, at small gatherings, and Joy in my house and at Capos and at the concerts I played in. I want to convey the flavor, the ambiance, the context, of each. The Irish, the fame, the fame that

should have been, the tradition, the respect and all that I found in being in their lives, their presence.

Kathleen was an an “All Ireland Fiddle champion”, and an “All Ireland Dance champion”, and a wonderfully beautiful woman. Sam had a style I think was as good or better than any Appalachian fiddler I ever heard. Joy came from a tradition of music in her area that goes back for generations in same part of the world as my mother’s family. . And I sat with them, one on one, for many hours listening to them play, and appreciating it in my soul.

And they treated me with respect. They did not flatter me, they did not tell me I would learn to be great. They told me that I was learning some of what they were trying to teach me. They told me I was doing what I could to get better and they were satisfied with my progress. It was not that my progress was great, it was that given who I was, where I was coming from, the background experience, or lack thereof, that I had, I was doing as well as they could hope and they were willing to keep teaching me, and encouraging me, and occasionally giving me a little praise. This was such a trip. All I really knew then was that I wanted more and kept going back. I never really chose to stop.

The privilege of sitting next to Sam Gobble, as his student, at Fiddle Jams was a privilege beyond price. The joy of listening to Kathleen play a piece for me to learn was ethereal. The feeling of sharing in multi-generation musical tradition in the same part of Virginia as my mother’s family was wonderful. And my mother’s grandfather played fiddle, and I have his fiddle now. I wonder if Joy or Sam might take it and tell me if it was worth fixing up...even now.

I remember the experience of Kathleen standing behind me and guiding my bow hand to get the sound she wanted out of my violin. And she got me my violin, to use in place of the one I was renting. Sam got me a case because the one I had was so grungy. Joy encouraged me to play in the Capos student concerts, even though I was 50 years older than most of the other performers.

Perhaps there is more to write, ..but the above catches the essence of what I wanted to say and I will post it with my memories soon... I hope.

I think it would be useful to tell a little about the context of my experience with Sam and Joy when I lived in Abingdon. I read the a beginner’s fiddle class would

be offered at the Virginia Highlands Community College (VHCC). I signed up and went to classes once a week for several months. The teacher was Sam Gooble. Sam lived in Mountain City, Tennessee, about an hour from Abingdon. When the classes ended, continued teaching at a venue in Chilhowee for a few months, but found that did not work for him. I asked Sam if there were some way that I could continue to take classes with him. We arranged that I would come to his home in Mountain City one evening each week for a class.

I was working at Emery & Henry college at the time. I would leave the college at 5 PM and drive through Damascus and then up the winding mountain road to Mountain City (population 2500) and have dinner before going to Sam's house at 7PM. I loved the trip there and the experience in Mountain City and at Sam's house. I was a student of Sam's for several years and during that time went occasional informal events where he played with others he knew. There were a few in nearby Chilhowee. Sam also told me of fiddle jams at various locations and went to a number of those. I may write them up separately.

I don't remember why I stopped going to classes with Sam. I think there were some changes in my life and I took a break. In any case I decided that maybe I would take Banjo classes for a while I had heard a banjo player whose style I particularly liked and I pursued her as a teacher. I may think of her name. She and her husband lived, I think, in Koneronk and I went to visit them to convince her to take me as a student. That visit could be written up also.

She told me that she no longer taught and did not want to resume but she told me of her teacher, Joy Patton, and I contacted her. Joy was in mourning for her husband and said "not now". I called her every few months and she eventually said she would give it a try. She lived up toward Galax not far from where she was born and raised. She commuted to a job in Bristol, passing Abingdon. We agreed that she would come to my house on Mason Place in Abingdon once a week and banjo classes began. Joy said that I was the person who got her to resume her music after her husband's death, and she thanked me for that.

Joy learned to play the banjo from her father as she grew up. She told me that there were other musicians in her extended family, fiddlers, singers, and more. I think she learned some her fiddle music from an uncle. I will discuss this with her when I speak with her on the phone in the near future.

After a few months I found that I was not making good progress with the banjo. It was considerably more challenging than I had expected. Though Joy had grown up playing the banjo and had learned from her father, she had also taken up the fiddle as an adult. Though she thought of herself as more of a banjo player, she was quite good on the fiddle and her banjo background gave her both a large repertoire of tunes and a good understanding of chord structure, chord patterns and embellishment and I think contributed significantly to her fiddle playing. The leader of the band she played with [ name ? ] was a banjo player and they needed her more as a fiddler, so that was her main role. Another woman often played fiddle with her and they practiced together and added a lot to the band.

While I was having weekly lessons with Joy in my house a new music store opened in Abingdon. It was called Capos. The owner/manager was Gil Brasswell and I knew his wife, Amy, from working with her at Emery & Henry. Gil was a talented musician and sometimes played for shows at the Barter Theater in Abingdon.

Joy began to teach at Capos and I switched to meeting her there for classes rather than my house. Around this time I decided to try taking fiddle lessons from her rather than banjo. That worked out well for me and I loved her music. She did not have the same sizzle as Sam Gobble, but she had a wonderfully balanced style and was a very patient teacher.

I took lessons from Joy at Capos for a year or two. During that time Capos would arrange for a student concert once or twice a year. It was held in large room with a stage at the VHCC. I performed as a soloist in at least two of these concerts, together with 15 to 20 younger Capos students playing a variety of instruments.

Eventually Capos closed. I continued to take classes from Joy in Marion at the Wayne Henderson Center for the arts for a few months but eventually felt it was time to stop. I also taught introduction to computers to young students as part of a home schooling consortium for a year or two at that center.

## **Kathleen Collins**

I would like to tell you how I ended up as Kathleen's student. Starting in 1977 I began to attend the Folk Music Week at Pinewoods camp near Plymouth, Massachusetts. I hope to write up my memories of the many weeks I spent there.

In the summer of 1978 Kathleen Collins was on the staff of the folk music week and performed in various staff concerts that week. I was enchanted by her fiddle playing. It was wonderful. I found out that she would also be on the staff for the next summer, 1979.

I decided to get a fiddle for the 1979 Folk Music week and take her beginner's fiddle class. I found that there was a store that rented instruments primarily to high-school students in Westchester county, NY, where I lived. I rented a fiddle and showed up at Folk Music week in the summer of 1979 with a fiddle. I did not even know how to tune it. I did attend Kathleen's class for a few sessions, but my complete lack of fiddle knowledge was such that once I learned how to tune the fiddle and play "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" I decided I could learn more by just going off in the woods on my own and working on picking out tunes.

I did learn enough to play a little bit at the campers concert at the end of the week. I sang a song with a male friend and played, on the fiddle, an approximation of the chorus a few times during the song. The song we sang was a cover of "Rake and a Ramblin Man" sung by Don Williams, currently available on Youtube . It's possible that somewhere in my footlocker is a cassette with a recording of our performance of that song.

Though I was well aware that my fiddle playing was what one might expect for a person who had never held a fiddle before that week, I thought I got a few notes right. I asked Kathleen if she had any comments and she, kindly, said that I been wise to pick a song in which the tonic note was D because this allowed me to play the open D string a lot and that did not sound too bad.

For the second year in a row I was possessed by Kathleen's performances. I knew she lived in Manhattan. At the end of the week I asked whether she taught classes and might be willing to work with an older beginner like me. I turned 40 that year. In particular I asked whether there was any chance that she could teach me enough that someone hearing me might recognize something like her style. She said that it was a possibility if I had some ability and stayed with it long enough. I arranged to start classes as soon as possible.

Kathleen lived in the Inwood section of Manhattan. Located at the Northern tip of the Manhattan Island the Inwood neighborhood was predominantly Irish for

much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At this time I was working at Merrill Lynch in lower Manhattan and I took the subway up to Inwood for her class once a week.

I continued to use the rented fiddle. At one class Kathleen presented me with a fiddle she thought I should buy. I think it cost \$125. I still have it. She thought it had a good sound,

I think I took classes for between one and two years. I loved it. I was divorced and lived alone. I practiced a lot and, under her instruction, learned to read music enough to play tunes in D and A from the giant book of Irish tunes that was the fiddle bible. I learned to play around 20 different Irish tunes. A few of them sounded not bad and I can still play some of them today. I was also able to pick out some of these tunes on the banjo and I still play those as well.

Though I loved the fiddle and my classes, I ended up without a full time job for several months and my father agreed to help me through this rough spot. He came to visit me in NY and we went over my budget. He and I agreed that I had to drop any expense that was not absolutely essential. Though it broke my heart I agreed to drop the fiddle class. I think I might have become a half-way decent fiddler had that not happened.

I did play once for a Chapel service at Star Island. It was on a Sunday morning of a Pelican reunion weekend, probably around 2005, and I was there with Elaine and both my sons, Matt and Paul, who had both been Pelicans. I played as people came into the service. I played tunes that I had learned from Kathleen 20 or more years earlier. I like to think that I played fairly well. It was a joy for me.

While I was Kathleen's student I recorded her classes on cassette tapes. I have a footlocker full of cassette tapes with me in California and I know some of the tapes are from those lessons. However, I doubt I will ever explore the hundreds of tapes in the foot locker. I found a Youtube video of Kathleen and fiddle that I liked. See the link below. Delightful as this is, it does not have the same impact on me that her playing a tune for me in her apartment had. The teaching sessions were, lacking a better word, transformative.

Youtube – Kathleen Collins

Poem, Slow Air and Reels: The Fiddler of Dooney/The Wind Among  
The Reeds/Tybee Island/Paddy Fahey's

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9vA6XghiHk>

If it does not work when you click it you may be able to copy it and paste in the URL box on your browser.

Recordings related to this memory – “Fiddle Teachers – Harry Baya”. For technical reasons I chose not to put links to recorded music in this document. However, I have created a separate, related document that does have the links.

This document is labeled “Fiddle Teacher Memories” and its file name is “fiddle\_teacher\_memories.pdf”. The related HTML file is titled “Fiddle Teacher Memories links” and its file name is “fiddle\_teacher\_memories\_links.html”