



Thirty Fiddle Tunes

from the

Manuscript Collection

of

William Sidney

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compiled and edited by

Alan Buechner and Bill Shull

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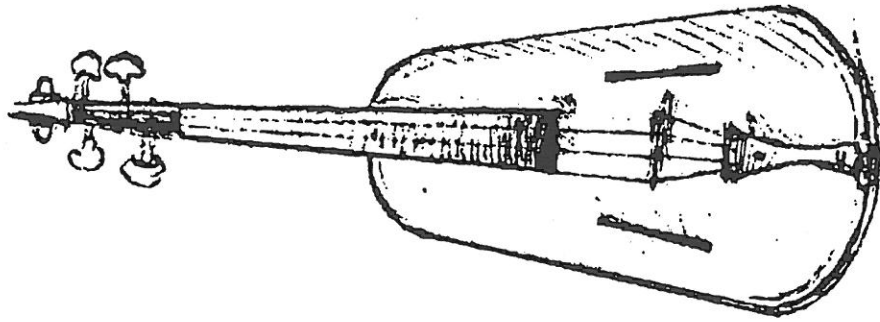
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Alan Buechner and Bill Shull
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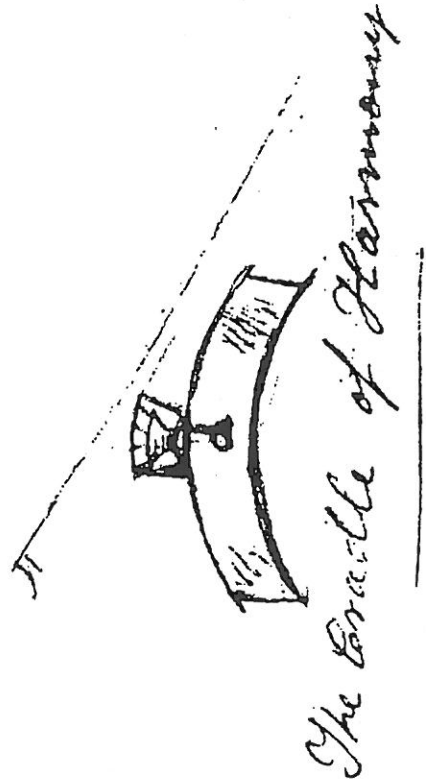
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Cover illustration: "Julian," ink on paper, n.d., by William Sidney Mount.

Side: patent illustration for Mount's "Cradle of Harmony" [Patent Model, 1852]



INTRODUCTION

Remembered today as America's first important genre painter, William Sidney Mount (1807-1868) counted among his patrons various affluent New Yorkers who, having risen above their origins, looked back with nostalgia to the days when they were boys growing up on the farm. Mount catered to this interest by devoting a significant number of his paintings to scenes of his fellow Long Islanders hunting rabbits, catching crabs, spearing eels, hoeing corn, pressing apples for cider, and playing the fiddle, both for amusement and for dancing.

While these paintings tell us a lot about country life and country music in William Sidney's day, they do not begin to suggest his lifelong involvement with music. To understand this we must turn to the Mount Collection at the Museums at Stony Brook. Assembled by the late Ward Melville and his wife, it contains many of the artist's finest paintings, most of his sketches, and some of his private papers. Also included are two of his violins, including one of his own design, which dates from 1857 and which was nicknamed "The Cradle of Harmony." Lastly there is his collection of over 450 fiddle tunes.

The exact number of tunes which Mount collected remains problematical, because his collection not only includes music supplied to him by other fiddlers, such as his uncle, Micah Hawkins, and the dancing master, Nelson Mathewson, but also the popular dance music of the time, published in

books such as Higgins' *Original Dances* (1829) and Winner's *Collection* (1853.) A further complication is that Mount never cataloged his collection and his heirs allowed it to be scattered to the winds after his death. A small part of it remains in private hands.

Fortunately, there are enough riches in the Melville holdings to satisfy a hundred fiddlers. Among them are dozens of traditional Anglo-American fiddle tunes, including reels, jigs, hornpipes, and strathspeys. There is also a generous sampling of the cotillion literature, apparently composed by literate musicians, as well as tunes for newly fashionable dances: the waltz, the polka, the quadrille, and the schottische. A few duets, a number of marches and quicksteps, and a handful of minstrel show tunes, some of which were ultimately assimilated into our American folk tradition, round out the collection.

Much of this music was casually written down on loose sheets of paper and on the blank pages of manuscript books without reference to tune categories and with scant attention to the niceties of formal notation. Nevertheless, when William Sidney transcribed a tune, he was usually careful about specific pitches and rhythms, enabling the present editors to determine his intent with reasonable accuracy. It remains only for the modern fiddler to see beyond the notes and bring the tunes to life once again.

TUNE NOTES

SETAUKET

The village of Setauket lies to the east of Stony Brook, where the Mount brothers, William Sidney and Shepard Alonzo, made their home. In their youth Setauket was noted for the enthusiasm of its dancers and the remarkable skill of its resident fiddler, Anthony Clapp, who was affectionately called "Black Tony." As is so often the case with fiddle tunes, the composer of this piece is not known.

CENTURY HORNPIPE

The likelihood is strong that William Sidney collected this tune from his Uncle Micah Hawkins, an amateur composer, a fiddler, and himself a collector of tunes. This hornpipe was not his creation, however, but was drawn from the huge repertory of Anglo-American tunes which were common property at that time.

DRUNKEN SCOTCHMAN

This rousing piece is notable for the way in which it was played, that is, certain strings of the violin were deliberately mis-tuned to facilitate ease of execution. Modern fiddlers call this procedure cross-tuning, the classically-trained violinist, scordatura.

I'M OFF TO CHARLESTON, JENNY'S FAVORITE COTILLION, GOOD MORROW TO YOUR NIGHTCAP, SO EARLY IN THE MORNING, AND THE OLD MOOSE.

These tunes, clearly Anglo-American in origin, have one thing in common. They were missed by the compiler-collectors of the standard, published anthologies which are routinely consulted by scholars looking for prior appearances of a given tune. This means that it is possible that Mount was the only collector of his time to record these tunes while they were still a part of a viable tradition. From the evidence at hand, it would appear that they were near the end of their productive lives, when he collected them. How can this be?

Fiddle tunes, being a folk phenomenon, obey the dictates of that culture, which is to say, they are created, usually anonymously, are passed from player to player through the workings of oral tradition, and then pass from general use, as they are crowded out by newer tunes, which catch the fancy of players. There are exceptions, of course, to this rule. Some tunes, such as *Arkansas Traveler*, remain attractive to succeeding generations and thus achieve a measure of immortality. These did not.

The fact that a given tune may be known by different titles, depending upon the players involved, must also be considered. Unfortunately, the standard bibliographies and tune indices, splendid though they are, have their respective limitations, when it comes to ferreting out these tunes-in-disguise.

At the very least, *Thirty Fiddle Tunes* can rightly claim the distinction of having revived a number of worthy tunes, long out of circulation.

"STONY BROOK," NUMBERS 1 AND 2, FEB. 18, 1853

Basically, these are untitled tunes whose identity was linked exclusively to the place where and the date when Mount collected them. His informant's identity went unrecorded, but it seems likely that he was one of the many fiddler-visitors to Mount's home who repaid their host's hospitality by giving him some tunes for his collection.

STOP JIG

In Mount's day the jig was a solo dance in which the dancer was free to demonstrate the fanciest steps and wildest gyrations he knew. How the fiddler and the dancer coordinated their actions is not as clear in this piece as it is in others similarly titled.

UNTITLED, NUMBERS 1-6

These tunes have two things in common. First, all of them are musically interesting. Second, there is not a shred of evidence as to their origin or from whom they were collected. Only those obsessed with labeling everything will worry about this. Fiddlers, then and now, won't give the matter a second thought, as long as the tunes are good and they are.

BENNINGTON ASSEMBLY

A historically important town in southern Vermont and its country dancers are celebrated in the title of this tune. Dance assemblies, often held in taverns and comprised of everyone who loved to dance regardless of age, were a regular part of New England life in Mount's day.

FROM MR. L. ROBINSON'S COLLECTION

The melodic mode and phrase construction of Mr. Robinson's tune, one of the finest in Mount's Collection, strongly suggests that its origin was somewhere in the British Isles.

MOBILE SERENADE POLKA, A DUET

Although most of the Mount Collection contains music with strong ties to folk and traditional music, this *SERENADE POLKA* serves to remind us that Mount himself was not an unsophisticated person, but an urbane, country gentleman who frequently traveled to New York City to observe and participate in cultural developments there. This included attendance at formal balls, where the newest European dances, such as the polka, were danced to the accompaniment of a full orchestra.

LADY MONTGOMERY'S & MISS McCLEOD'S REELS

Like many Americans of his generation, Mount was fascinated by Scottish music of all kinds, particularly that associated with dances such as the strathspey and the reel. In time many Scottish tunes, including *LADY MONTGOMERY'S*, and *MISS McCLEOD'S* were assimilated into the repertoires of American fiddlers.

HORNPIPE

This rollicking tune is typical of the Nineteenth Century hornpipe in that it is comprised of two repeated four-bar phrases in 2/4 meter. As such, it cannot be distinguished musically from a reel tune in the same meter, a fact which bothered dancers not in the least. Their dances could be fitted to the music of either.

RUSTIC REEL

Mount copied out two slightly different versions of this tune, the fruit of one of his sojourns in the big city. Later, he added a new ending of his own composition, which, in performance, served as a kind of coda, or wrap-up.

OLD MOLLY HARE

Until this song-tune was discovered in the Mount Collection, most scholars associated it exclusively with Hill-billy music of the Nineteen Thirties and Forties. This finding neatly proves Ira Ford's assertion that the tune is much older than the text. Its first verse is:

Old Molly Hare,
What you doin' there,
Diggin' out a post hole
And scratchin' out your hair?

INDIAN WHOOP

The Indian's war cry, or whoop, became a cliché in American folklore. Here the fiddler, as indicated in the score, would let out an appropriate howl to liven things up, even as he continued to play for the dancers.

ARKANSAS TRAVELER

Old time fiddlers are familiar with this tune which was the centerpiece of a humorous, stage dialogue between a farmer-fiddler and a city slicker who has lost his way in the country. What they do not know and will surely appreciate is the fact that Mount collected this version from a fiddler named T.J. Cook on August 22, 1852, a date well before this all-time favorite-to-be first appeared in print.

MAMELUKE

The range of Mount's taste is well illustrated by *MAMELUKE*. It is typical of the elaborate tunes associated with the formal dances, other than the waltz and the polka, imported from Europe before and after the Civil War. It is about as far removed from the folk idiom as one can get.

KEEMO KIMO

This song-tune may be traced to the musical stage of the Eighteen-fifties. Its title, in minstrel dialect, comes from the opening verse, as given by Ford:

In South Carolina de darkies go
Sing song Kitty, won't you ki'me O!
Dat's where de white folks plant de tow,
Sing song Kitty, won't you ki'me O!

DORSETSHIRE MARCH

In Mount's time most country dances opened with a grand march around the room, giving the couples an opportunity to join hands and form up. Many of the marches were drawn from Anglo-American military music. Such appears to be the case here.



Setauket

