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The Violin Sings the Blues

By Anne Harris

When I was three, I remember sitting in a movie theater with my mother and sister, watching *Fiddler on the Roof*. In the opening sequence, a silhouetted Isaac Stern plays a violin on a rooftop. I turned to my mother and pointed at the screen and said, "Mommy, that's what I want to do!" And I pretty much wouldn't stop bugging her about it. For years. My persistence won its case, and when I was around eight, I finally began formal training.

I studied with a private instructor for the next 10 years – all classical repertoire. I was trained in the Suzuki Method, which emphasizes beginning at a very young age, learning to play by ear and the importance of environment – being saturated in a musical community. The head of the school orchestra, Shirley Mullins, along with my private teacher, Mary Schumacher, were two vibrant souls who were critical to my formative years as a musician. I learned technique and a deep respect for not only the instrument, but for music in general.

I was fortunate to be raised in a small, extremely liberal college town in southwest Ohio that placed an exceedingly high value on music in the public schools. Additionally, my parents had a big LP collection that was incredibly diverse – from operas to gospel to blues to pop to rock, classical and beyond. I soaked it all up, finding beauty and connection in all of it. R&B, funk, soul and blues became my passionate spirit food.

Description of the Violin

The violin is the smallest and highest pitched member of the violin family, which includes violins, violas, cellos and double basses. Traditionally made of wood, this is a bowed instrument with four strings tuned in fifths, strung across a fretless fingerboard. The bows are traditionally strung with horsehair. The most common question I get asked is if a violin and a fiddle

are two different instruments. The answer is no, these are simply two different names used to describe the stylistic differences in playing – the violin being more commonly associated with classical music and the fiddle being associated with folk and roots styles of music. I consider myself a fiddle player. Many people feel the violin resembles the human voice more than any other instrument, which is why it has such an emotional resonance with people. It is also why the voice of a fiddle can fit such a wide range of musical genres so perfectly, and why I feel it has such a beautiful range of expression for blues music.

I only have one violin, and it's the same one my parents bought me when I grew into a full-size instrument: a 1961 Roth violin that is a reproduction of a 1734 Guarneri. I installed a LR Baggs pickup on it to amplify the sound and I play through a LR Baggs D.I. I play in standard tuning. As far as using pedals, it really depends on the gig, but in general I only use a few pedals and pretty sparingly. In most of the scenarios I play, I don't mess with the natural sound of my fiddle too much. I love its natural, rich tone.

History of the Violin

Although the Italian luthier Andrea Amati is widely credited with creating the modern template for the violin and violin family in the 16th century, bowed stringed instruments were around long before in many places around the world.

While there are records of stringed instruments existing in Europe in the Middle Ages, it is thought that some of the first bowed stringed instruments may have originated in Central Asia with instruments such as the morin khuur from Mongolia. These Central Asian instruments then traveled via trade routes to other parts of the world.

Africa also has a rich history of one-stringed, bowed instruments dating back to the Stone Age, found all over the



Henry "Son" Simms (left) and Muddy Waters at Stovall Plantation in the early 1940s. Photo by John W. Work, courtesy BluEsoterica Archives

continent. The goje is a one or two-string fiddle from Nigeria. Snakeskin covers a gourd bowl to create a membrane head similar to a banjo. Horsehair strings are suspended on a bridge. In Mali, the soku is a similar instrument. It uses snake or lizard skin as well. It's very possible that the early prototype for the modern-day violin could have come to Europe by way of the Moorish incursions.

Of course, there were a wide variety of stringed instruments around in 16th century Europe that the modern-day violin and its family could have eventually evolved from as well, such as the lira da braccio, a bowed stringed instrument much like the violin that was popular in the Renaissance period. The oldest surviving violin is named Charles IX, made by Andrea Amati in 1564, which supports the theory that Amati did indeed create the first standard prototype of modern violins, or at least provides physical evidence to justify this claim.

The Violin and the Blues

Early blues music emerged from the Black string band traditions of the 19th century where fiddles and banjos were the predominant voices, and guitars, a rarity. But Africans were first exposed to European instruments on the slave ships that carried them to the new world. Slave fiddling was documented as early as the 1690s, and by the 1700s, Black fiddlers were as prevalent as Black banjo players. Slave fiddlers would play for whites at plantation balls and other entertainments. They were also often encouraged by their masters to play for the dancing of their fellow slaves. Black music thrived in ports along the Mississippi River, and by the 1840s, New Orleans was known as the center of Black fiddle music. Slaves in the region were often sent there to learn the instrument, returning as trained entertainers to their home plantations.

Following the Emancipation, many former slave musicians continued to play professionally locally and as traveling musicians, in places like town squares, local square dances and traveling medicine shows. The fiddle remained hugely popular due, in part, to its low cost and portability.

As blues music emerged as a popular form and a dominant force among African Americans in the early 1900s, many string bands and jug bands began to incorporate blues repertoires in order to stay relevant. Lonnie Johnson, widely recognized as a blues guitar virtuoso, claimed the fiddle as his first love and spent the early part of his career in New Orleans honing his skills as a fiddle player. He played in his father's string band as well as on excursion boats along the Mississippi. He signed with Okeh records in 1925 and went on to record violin on nearly a dozen early recordings.

The Mississippi Sheiks, a guitar and fiddle band consisting mainly of members of the Chatmon family, found great success with their mix of blues and country music. Based in Jackson, MS, they scored a hit for Okeh in 1930 with "Sitting on Top of the World," which was popular among Black and white musicians, and was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2008.

Joe Thompson, 1918–2012, was one of the last fiddle players in the Black string band tradition from the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Thompson played fiddle and called dance sets in a band with his brother, Nate, and their cousin, Odell, both on banjo. They played for dances, both Black and white. He learned to fiddle from his father, who in turn learned from his own father, a slave.

"Fiddle has been in the blues from the beginning," says blues violinist Lionel Young, citing Charlie Patton, who often was accompanied by Henry "Son" Simms. Simms led a Mississippi



Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown. Photo by BluesPhotosbyDonMcGhee

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Lionel Young, winner of two International Blues Challenges: as a solo-duo artist in 2008 and with his band in 2011. Photo by BluesPhotosbyDonMcGhee

quartet that included Muddy Waters in the 1940s. "Both Bo Diddley and Big Bill Broonzy played fiddle before they played guitar. Lonnie Johnson played violin and, of course, there was Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown – he did stuff I couldn't do. He has all the rhythm and he could put it on any instrument." Indeed, Brown, who played multiple instruments and blended various genres of music, is regarded as one of the most influential musicians to advance the use of the fiddle in blues music.

As the blues went from being acoustic to electric in the 1940s, and as waves of African Americans migrated north in attempts to leave a history of oppressive rural Southern roots in the past, the use of the fiddle in Black blues music dwindled. Young, though, foresees a possible revival. Young, who plays fiddle about 75 percent of his time on stage (guitar the other 25 percent), plays several violins, including a five-string electric violin. "There's a resurgence because now there are electric instruments that are violins. In a generation or two, you will see a lot more violin players trying to play blues."

Contemporary Blues and Roots Fiddlers

Some of the violin players that have been inspiring to me include Don "Sugarcane" Harris (no relation), Papa John Creach, Regina Carter, Liz Carroll and Natalie MacMaster. All of these artists have taken the instrument and infused it with their own unique sonic signatures, and that is what I aspire to do. Another of my inspirations, Rhiannon Giddens, has grown from her beginnings as a founding member of the Grammy-winning Carolina Chocolate Drops (playing fiddle and banjo) to become a singular force of nature in the American roots genre, earning her countless accolades and a Grammy nomination as a solo artist.

Other blues violinists on the scene include Ilana Katz, a Boston-based blues and old-time fiddle player who is a preservationist, carrying the styles, traditions and tunes of another era for a new generation of blues fans to dive into. There's also Cedric Watson, a four-time Grammy-nominated fiddler, singer-songwriter and accordionist who has emerged as a rising star in the Cajun, Creole and Zydeco traditions. You

can find violinists of other genres blending into the blues – like bluegrass, folk, Americana and country – who are also keeping the violin relevant in music today.

My own blues indoctrination was sparked upon meeting Otis Taylor at Buddy Guy's Legends during a kick-off event for the Chicago Blues Festival in 2008. I hadn't heard his music at that point, but listened to it in my car on the way home and became immediately entranced with his unique sound and vision. I accepted his offer to sit in on a few of his shows over the weekend, and after that, I toured internationally with him for nine years and appeared on four of his records. During this period, I dove deeply into the blues and discovered a new chamber of my heart.

The rich and varied role of the violin in blues music may not be widely known or understood by many, but it played a critical role in the birthing of the genre, and its presence is a testament to the depth and diversity of the African American culture at large.



Chicago-based fiddle player and singer-songwriter Anne Harris has long been crafting her unique sound, producing six indie studio records and playing countless performances in the U.S. and abroad. Her collaborations, live and in-studio, span a large and diverse group of artists and genres, and her uniquely expressive performance style has made her an audience favorite. Check out Anne's latest instrumental, folk fiddle record, [Roots](#), and connect with her on all social media platforms. www.anneharris.com

Resources:

"Violin, Sing The Blues For Me /

African-American Fiddlers on Early Phonograph Records"

by Marshall Wyatt, oldhatrecords.com/ResearchAAViolin.html

"Why Black Folks Don't Fiddle" by Tony Thomas,

www.bluegrasswest.com/ideas/why_black



Fiddler, singer, songwriter and this feature's author, Anne Harris.

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