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I am currently enrolled in the PhD program in musicology at McGill University. My thesis research will be on the transformation of Scottish fiddle tunes in Québec, but I've had the pleasure of working on a number of other fascinating projects through my coursework over the last few years. This summer I'm working on two projects, the first about the spread of "chopping" into various North Atlantic fiddling genres, and the second about Los Angeles jazz violinist Ginger Smock.

Here are some excerpts from a paper I'm currently writing about chopping. I start with answers to the three most frequent questions I have been asked and then move into a description of my research project.

If you are a chopping musician and would like to be a part of this study, please send me an email at laura.risk@mail.mcgill.ca.

What is "chopping"?

The chop is a percussive technique specific to bowed string instruments. It consists of first dropping the bow vertically onto the strings to make a crunchy, percussive noise and then picking it up off the strings with a forward motion to make another sound. This latter sound is pitched, though in practice it is possible to play it without pitch by muting the strings with the left hand. The chop is always played at the frog, or the lower end, of the bow. The sound of the chop echoes percussive techniques on other instruments and, in fact, chopping began as a violin imitation of the muted backbeat hits commonly used by bluegrass mandolin players as an accompaniment technique.

Who invented the chop, and when?

Bluegrass fiddler [Richard Greene](#) invented the chop in 1966, while playing with Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys. He originally called it "the chunky chop."

Greene had been playing with northern bluegrass band The Greenbriar Boys when he was called to sub in the Bluegrass Boys for a January 1966 concert at McGill University in Montreal. Greene officially joined the band in April of that year. Soon, however, he was called to task for rushing the tempos. As he tells it:

I was a young guy who just could not keep the tempo down. I rushed like crazy. And Bill had a tendency to rush a little bit too, so the band was falling apart (chuckles), because of my rushing. So [Monroe] asked me to not play any background fills or licks, just to play rhythm only, and then to take my breaks, my solos on the vocal songs, and then play the instrumentals. But otherwise, only play rhythm... And the only rhythm I was aware of on fiddle at that point was a tapping on the backbeat with the tip of the bow. Which I'd seen, and Paul Warren in the Flatt and Scruggs band did that. That's all that anyone ever did in terms of rhythm, so that's what I did. (source: Feb 2011 phone interview)

Tapping near the tip of the bow for the bulk of a show lasting over an hour caused Greene's forearm and wrist to hurt, so he moved this rhythm towards the lower part of the bow and began playing "a short, accented note at the frog on every backbeat." That motion led to a different sort of arm and hand pain, so he began leaving his bow on the string after each offbeat, thus creating the chop. Greene frames this history as one of fortuitous serendipity: "I just was exhausted so on one of those downbow accents, I just couldn't lift the bow up again. My hand just stayed there, and that was the first chop... It was just like a collapsing of the bow onto the string."

How different was Greene's chop from other bluegrass fiddle backup techniques of the mid-60s? The video archive shows that other bluegrass fiddlers in the early 1960s were also playing short, rhythmic offbeats near the frog. (See, for instance, www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pWnZFrdQFE and www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6TRufo0poE) Fiddlers also occasionally used their instrument to imitate a mandolin. (See, for instance, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSHzgaCqM-o) Richard Greene's innovation, then, was to remove all horizontal motion and leave the bow on the string after each offbeat stroke, thus eliminating pitch and creating the characteristic crunchy "chop" noise. Leaving the bow on the string also gave the player a second sound to work with: that of the bow lifting off the string in preparation for the next chop. Says Greene, "You have to pick the bow up, so you get a sound out of it for free... a syncopation right after the backbeat." An innovator at heart, Greene combined these chop basics with chordal and melodic ideas and developed a virtuoso technique to incorporate into his soloing. Since the backbeat chopping sound is purely percussive while the following "pinching with the upbow" has a pitch, the melodies Greene constructs using the chop are highly syncopated.

Watch Richard Greene teach the chop:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAmVloansmU> (part 1)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QsFgdt00_A (part 2)

But I thought Darol Anger invented the chop?

Richard Greene taught fiddler [Darol Anger](#) to chop around 1975. A decade later, Anger co-founded the [Turtle Island String Quartet \(TISQ\)](#), one of the first alternative - non-classical - string quartets. Hoping to avoid the "incomplete" sound of a "string section to the jazz group," the quartet used chopping to mimic the sounds of a jazz rhythm section. Says Anger, "We really wanted to have a convincing sound. We wanted it to sound like the drums were there and the rhythm guitar was there, everything was there." The quartet developed chopping into a "comprehensive accompaniment technique" - quite different from Richard Greene's melodic chopping. The basic physical motion and core percussive sound, however, remained largely the same. (source: personal communication with Darol Anger, August 2010 and May 2011)

It should be noted, however, that Anger added to the chop a horizontal motion in which the bow moves back and forth along the line of the string. (Richard Greene's chop was, and remains, perpendicular to the string.) This motion is now a fundamental component of chopping for many players and has paved the way for other innovations such as [Casey Driessen](#)'s "triple chop," a percussive triplet created as the bow skids horizontally across the string.

Watch Darol Anger teach the chop:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Lud1IMpJm4&feature=related>

Watch Casey Driessen chop:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLc-PT9H1nE&feature=related>

What exactly is this research project about?

I am particularly interested in the diffusion of the chop from the mid-1990s until the present. I see this project as a response to earlier ethnomusicological research seeking to map the geographical and temporal diffusion of songs, tunes or other musical elements. Such studies often examined the dispersion and variation of a musical text and then sought to reconstruct the history of that dispersion. (See, for instance, Samuel Bayard's "Two Representative Tune Families of British Tradition" in *Midwest Folklore*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring 1954.)

More recently, ethnomusicology has moved away from diffusion research. As Bruno Nettl has noted,

formal attempts at determining kinds and degrees of relationships in both style and content have not fared well in the period since 1985, a period in which personal interpretation, informed by consciousness of reflexivity and the belief that the position of the observer plays a major role in the quality of observations.[sic] (Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one Issues and Concepts* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005]: 130.)

The issues Bayard sought to address, however, are still very much with us. How do new musical ideas, be those tunes or techniques, enter an aural tradition? How and why are certain of those ideas adopted and others not? How do ideas of regional or national genre affect this dissemination, particularly when it occurs across accepted generic boundaries? I believe that the diffusion of the chop combines geographic and generic breadth with human and musical specificity in such a way as to allow a rethinking of these questions.

Chopping lends itself to an ethnographically-based diffusion history. As an instrumental technique consisting of a particular physical motion and an unusual sound, it is easily defined and easily recognized. Its relatively recent point of origin meant that I was able to speak directly with many early adopters and diffusers and that most of my interviewees had no trouble recalling when, where, and from whom they learned to chop. Chopping is also not the sort of technique that musicians stumble across on their own and therefore the presence of multiple independent sources, while theoretically possible, is highly unlikely.

Mapping the diffusion of the chop

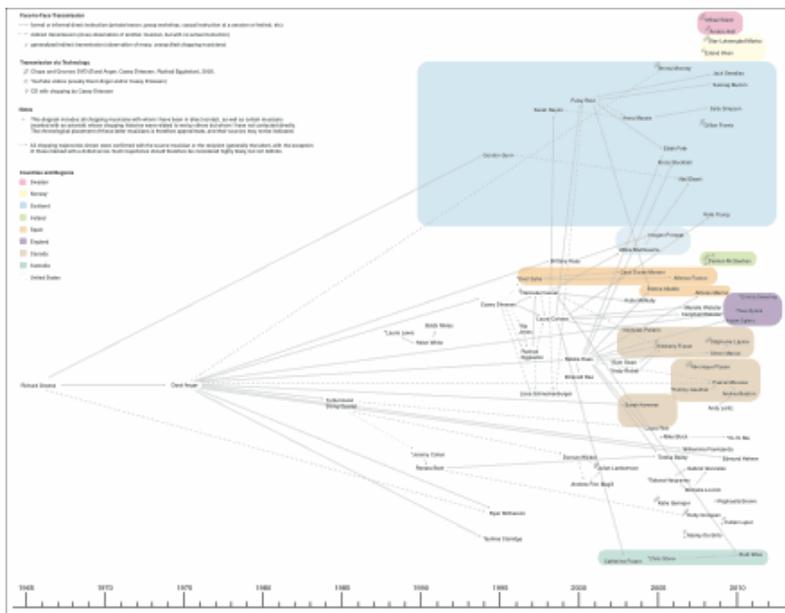
I have now interviewed over one hundred fiddlers and cellists across North America and Great Britain for this project. Using those interviews as a basis, I created this preliminary mapping of the the diffusion of the chop:

Solid arrows represent face-to-face transmission, either formal (private lesson, group class) or informal (one musician asks another how to chop while at a session or backstage at a festival, etc.)

Dotted lines represent influence, i.e. a player watches another player chop but doesn't receive direct instruction. Note, however, that both solid and dotted orange lines represent face-to-face interaction.

Background colors indicate countries.

I have also indicated technological modes of transmission: generally YouTube or the [Chops and Grooves DVD](#).



I have interviewed nearly all the musicians included here. However, in a few cases I include a musician with whom I have not yet spoken but whose chopping history was relayed to me by others.

This diagram by no means represents the full reach of the chop today. There are many more chopping musicians than I could ever hope to interview and my particular research interests meant that I focused on practitioners of "North Atlantic" fiddling, particularly the various styles found in Scotland, Ireland, Canada, Scandinavia, Spain, and the United States.

Please note that, for privacy reasons, individual names are not readable on this Web version.

Fiddle camps and local scenes

In the broader context of my research, I use this mapping to demonstrate the importance of two "communication channels" in the diffusion of the chop: fiddle camps and "local scenes." (I borrow the term "communication channels" from diffusion theorist Everett Rogers, who defines such channels as "the means by which messages get from one individual to another." See Rogers' classic text *Diffusion of Innovations* [New York: Free Press, 2003].)

Fiddle camps are week-long summer courses focusing on the repertoire and style of one or more musical traditions. The instructors, usually professional or semi-professional musicians, teach aurally, or with written music, or a combination of both. The students, who are of all ages and playing levels, attend group classes during the day and then often spend the evenings playing in jam sessions. Some camps focus on one particular fiddling style - Scottish, Irish, bluegrass, old-time - while others hire instructors representing a variety of musical styles. Such camps are part of a larger trend of institutionalized transmission of traditional fiddling styles and at these camps, the chop is often taught in the formal setting of a group class. Similar instructional courses exist for non-fiddling genres, though here I focus on camps that teach one or more North Atlantic fiddle styles.

I define "local scene" as a group of people who live near one another, meet regularly to play music informally, generally at jam sessions or parties, and share a common sense of how the music they play together will sound. I have purposely avoided the word "genre" in this definition because local scenes can, and do, include individual players who identify with a variety of musical genres. Local scenes are not, of course, fixed: people move in and out of town, or stay in town but stop attending the jam sessions regularly. Players may belong to several such scenes, and a player who travels frequently may belong to a local scene elsewhere than his or her hometown. Such scenes also have certain internal hierarchies and offer a variety of levels of belonging.

In the context of a local scene, the transmission of the chop tends to be informal. One fiddler described the spread of the chop within her local scene in these terms: "I don't exactly know how I learnt [to chop] or how it happened, but it just seemed like organically, everybody was learning how to accompany each other." A player might watch another musician chop and then either figure out the technique on his or her own or ask that musician for assistance. In the latter case, the chopping musician usually demonstrates the physical motion and percussive sound of the chop and may also teach one or two rhythmic patterns incorporating the technique.

This sort of informal transmission may seem to stand in contrast to the formal tuition of fiddle camps, but in fact this same informal dynamic occurs between students, and sometimes between students and instructors, during fiddle camp jam sessions. In addition, many musicians learn to chop at a fiddle camp and then carry the technique home to their local music scene, or vice versa. These parallels and linkages between fiddle camps and local scenes are not accidental: there is a constant back-and forth between the two. Players who belong to a particular local scene also attend fiddle camps in the summers, and fiddle camp attendees moving to a new locale may join the existing local scene or create a new one. Thus, a local scene might be described as an extension and conjoining of several fiddle camp scenes, and fiddle camps as the meeting of several local scenes. To a certain extent, fiddle camps *are* local scenes that only exist for one week out of every year.

Genre, identity and modernity: Towards a generational model of North Atlantic fiddling

I am particularly interested in the intersection of chopping and questions of musical genre and identity. Here, it is useful to distinguish between the "lived" and the "imagined" states of North Atlantic fiddling traditions: the lived state is one of constant crossover, in

which the horizontal flow of ideas (across regional genres and frequently between members of the same generation) is at least as great as the vertical (within one genre and from one generation to the next). The imagined, on the other hand, posits clearly definable regional styles whose musical distinctiveness reflects distinctive regional identities.

Many players, for instance, possess stylistic knowledge and repertoire spanning several genres. Embodying a lived reality of crossover, they nonetheless participate in these genres according to the rules of the imagined, by which each genre remains distinct and local etiquette regulates the use of innovations such as the chop.

Within a given North Atlantic fiddling genre, certain repertoire, playing styles, arrangement techniques, ensembles and presentation styles are marked as “traditional” while others are marked as “contemporary” or “modern.” Such modernity is not generally associated with an individual but rather with the musical and non-musical means by which an individual presents him or herself, and most professional musicians today operate with ease on both sides of this divide. In such a context, the chop may serve as a marker of modernity.

Chopping is also associated with youth - which is, of course, associated with modernity - and the diffusion of the chop falls as much along generational lines as along national borders. One fiddler (in her early 30s) said to me, “People older than me are not interested in [the chop] pretty much across the board. People my age, some of them are interested in it, some of them are not. Teenagers: every one is interested in it.”

Not all choppers are young, of course, and not all young players chop, but taken as a general trend these generational patterns point to an alternative approach to parsing the broad sweep of North Atlantic fiddling traditions. We define fiddle styles along geographic lines. “Irish,” “Scottish” “Appalachian,” “Swedish”: a traditional music is, almost by definition, associated with a particular physical place, even when its linkages with other traditions are well-known. Mapping the chop, however, has made me wonder if we might not be better off examining the related traditions of the North Atlantic along both geographic and generational lines. I think of the generation of fiddlers in Ireland, the United States and Quebec who did their best to imitate the 1920s and 30s recordings of New York Irish fiddler Michael Coleman; or the transnational influence of New Brunswick radio and television star Don Messer on fiddlers of the 40s and 50s; or the Scottish and Québécois folk revival bands of the 1970s who were inspired by the rock-inflected arrangements of the Irish trad supergroup The Bothy Band. These are all twentieth century examples, and I think a central, unanswered question is whether such generational trends existed prior to the introduction of recording and broadcasting technologies. That said, I would argue that even in this era of mass communication, my study of the chop suggests that traveling musicians, receptive local scenes and face-to-face transmission make for a potent combination.

Interested in knowing more?

I will present a version of this paper on Monday, July 18, 2011 at the [CSTM / ICTM conference](#) in St. Johns, Newfoundland.

Do you chop? Would you like to be a part of this project?

I am always looking for more chopping musicians! If you'd like to share your chopping history with me, please contact me at laura.risk@mail.mcgill.ca.

And even if you don't chop...

Many of my interviewees didn't chop either. Perhaps you observed the spread of chopping in your local scene, or you were taught chopping but decided not to use it? I would like to hear your thoughts! Please contact me at laura.risk@mail.mcgill.ca.