

Rodney Miller: *Making People Dance, Making Instruments Sing*

By Sarah Jane Nelson

There are people on this earth who are so accomplished that one can't help thinking they lived other lives before arriving in this one—it's almost as though they got a running start, while the rest of us were just looking for surfaces to latch onto. Dance musician and instrument maker Rodney Miller, Artist Laureate of New Hampshire, is undoubtedly one of these individuals.

Mysticism aside, back in the 1950s and '60s the young Rodney did enjoy a childhood with some fortuitous musical elements; he had a grandfather who played the fiddle, a mother who played a wide range of music on the piano and the organ, and a father who made sure the family attended fiddler picnics on Sunday afternoons in upstate New York. "That's where I learned tunes like 'Ragtime Annie,' 'Golden Slippers,' 'Turkey in the Straw,' and 'Arkansas Traveler.'"

Rodney's father was a Presbyterian minister out of Yale Divinity School who had liked and attended square dances in his youth, so jigs and reels filled his son's ears at an early age. Meanwhile, his mother exposed him not only to classical repertoire, but to the music of the twenties and thirties; "She played ragtime tunes like 'Nola,' 'Tiger Rag,' and 'Rosetta.' It's all in here," he told me, pointing to his head, during an interview at his historic, lakeside home in New Hampshire.

Rodney was exposed to the traditional arts from day one. When he wasn't preaching, Rodney's father did woodworking. In addition, when she wasn't playing piano, Rodney's mother did quilting. And if this didn't make for enough creative soil, Rodney's mother made sure that each child learned an instrument. Of the four children, Rodney got the fiddle. It was just the luck of the draw: "Nobody seemed aware of which 'handedness' you were back then. So, at age seven, I, being a lefty, was learning to play right-handed on my grandfather's full-size violin." Luckily, for this lanky youth, his arms were already long enough to reach the scroll.

By the time he was a teenager, Rodney began to make musical pilgrimages—a habit which has served him well:

"There was a fiddler named Wayne Merrill, out in West Walworth, near Rochester—he had been a lumberjack in his youth. He was in his late eighties when I met him. He had a repertoire from the turn of the century, stuff from Coles' *1,000 Fiddle Tunes*.... He had an eccentric repertoire, he told me all these stories about lumber camp and logging, like the mountain lion coming onto the



Photo: Robert Johnson (Photography Loft, Keene, NH)

roof of his cabin—he knew some quirky tunes, one of which I later recorded as 'Wayne Merrill's Jig,' on the *New Leaf* CD with David Surette."

Although he is widely regarded as one of the most versatile and accomplished contra dance fiddlers ever to grace the stage, Rodney didn't play for dances until he entered Oberlin College at the age of eighteen. "I was recruited to play basketball. I went for an interview my senior year of high school and found out that the fiddler in Oberlin's old time string band was graduating, and they said 'you have to be our fiddler. You have to come.'" So he quit basketball his freshman year and decided to join on as Fiddlin' Rod and the Totalo Ticklers.

Acting on an opportune tip from an Oberlin classmate, Rodney then spent the summer following his freshman year at Pinewoods Music and Dance Camp on Cape Cod. "I was on scholarship for Dance Music week and then was asked by May Gadd, (then director of the Country Dance and Song Society), to stay and play for dances at Folk Music week." This is every folkie's dream;

“What I came up with has been a cornerstone of my fiddle style—playing with the bow off the strings most of the time, punctuating notes only for the briefest time as the melody spins out.... For dance music, that’s what I do. I would describe it as a lifting, airy style of playing, as if energy and space is built into the music, helping to propel both the dancers and the listeners.”

the last night at Pinewoods is generally spent weeping into one’s beer (or into Long Pond) at the thought of having to leave camp the next day. In fact, Pinewoods brochures are full of cautionary phrases about making sure you pack the night before and observe the 10AM departure time Saturday morning. But the musical angels had surrounded Rodney once again.

During camp, Rodney was particularly pleased to make Gadd’s acquaintance. Not only was she kind and supportive of his fiddling, but she represented a direct link to the traditional music and dance world of the early 1900s, when collectors like England’s Cecil Sharpe were doing their seminal field work. In many ways, the relationships he forged during his 1971 stay at Pinewoods formed the springboard for Rodney’s career as a dance musician; it was there that he first met Jeff Warner and Jeff Davis. Contra dance leader Dudley Laufman, on staff that summer, immediately hired Rodney to drive around New England with him in his VW bug and to fiddle for dances in both Massachusetts and New Hampshire. And it’s up in New Hampshire where Rodney met and worked with the influential dance caller Ralph Page. Rodney began to fall in love with the New England contra dance scene.

Back at Oberlin, Rodney designed his own music and art major which consisted of making instruments, collecting fiddle tunes, and taking ethno-musicology classes.

“I applied for a grant to do a one semester project and got \$300 to travel to Vermont in the dead of winter with this reel to reel tape recorder. I went to Plainfield where Goddard College is and visited this old guy named Neil Converse. So I went to his house a couple of times at night—he was a dairy farmer in his mid-eighties who lived alone. Converse was spry but ailing, and I sat in his living room. He had a floor heater that kicked on every ten minutes, so we’d be talking and playing some tunes and there’d be this roar! I learned ‘Green Mountain Petronella,’ ‘Opera Reel,’ and lots of schottisches.... Both Wayne Merrill and Neil Converse had numbness in their hands and they kept slapping their thighs to get some feeling back in their fingers.”

Rodney also spent time visiting and playing tunes with Clem Myers, then president of the Northeast Fiddlers Association based in Barre, Vermont, where he picked up tunes such as “Pacific Slope Reel” and “Golden Wedding Reel.”

But with all of these experiences, when asked about mentors, the name that comes up most is that of a Québécois fiddler whom Rodney barely knew:

“I was infatuated with Jean Carignan. Just trying to learn everything that he played. I kept putting the needle back on that vinyl

over and over to learn the hard stuff.” This was before the Amazing Slow-Downer that so many musicians now avail themselves of. “I first heard Jean Carignan play on his *Folk Fiddler Electrifies Newport* album back in the mid-seventies. It was one of those life-changing moments. I thought, how can someone play like that? He sounded like Michael Coleman on crack. I had to figure out how he played like he did...electric, bouncing bows, pyrotechnic triplets. I knew then what I had to do...figure it out and imitate him as best I could. I spent hours, weeks, years, doing that. What I came up with has been a cornerstone of my fiddle style—playing with the bow off the strings most of the time, punctuating notes only for the briefest time as the melody spins out. That’s not to say I don’t use the bow full-on while playing waltzes and airs or some of the old time/bluegrass tunes. But for dance music, that’s what I do. I would describe it as a lifting, airy style of playing, as if energy and space is built into the music, helping to propel both the dancers and the listeners. That’s why I made a series of albums with the word Airplang, to carry through with that airy feeling. Carignan gave me that insight. I met him once and shook his hand. Little did he know what a huge influence he had on me.”

Rodney—whose fiddling spans a startlingly broad repertoire—speaks lyrically of the ways in which contra dance music welcomes people from different traditions.

“New Hampshire has a rich French Canadian musical background because of the numbers who came to work in the mills in Nashua, Manchester, Milford, and Concord. Through the dance scene I met Omar Marcoux from Concord. I went to his home and he took me into his basement where he did fiddle repair. He was also a talented fiddler and knew an extensive Canadian repertoire, [like] ‘Maple Sugar’ and ‘Joys of Quebec’ which I learned and incorporated into my dance tune repertoire. I also traveled down to Boston and went to parties at the house of Paddy Cronin, a well known and recorded Irish fiddler.”

In 1976, Rodney, soon to start a family, got a job as a civil engineer in Keene, New Hampshire. During this time he was playing for more and more dances. The remote and picturesque Monadnock village of Nelson has always been a magnet for musical talent, and this is where he would meet musicians like Bob McQuillen, Newt Tolman, April Limber, Pete Colby, and many others. “I was playing in Nelson almost every month with my brother Randy on piano, for a few years running, and we were playing tunes like ‘Rock Valley Jig,’ ‘Lamplighter’s Hornpipe,’ ‘Opera Reel,’ and ‘Chorus Jig.’”

While his Monadnock dance experiences set the foundation for Rodney’s musical style, he would soon go bicoastal: these days he often tours on the West Coast, and recently gave a contra music

One of Rodney's most profound musical connections is with his daughter, Elvie Miller, who plays piano and accordion on their *Spyglass Waltz* recording. Elvie is now married and living in Ireland with her fiddler husband, Denis Liddy, and family, and won the Senior All Ireland Piano Accompaniment Competition in 2011.

Rodney first got on the national radar in the 1980s when *New England Chestnuts* came out. These recordings almost undisputedly set the standard for the classic New England style of playing. A cascade of career-building opportunities was quick to follow: in 1980 Frank Ferrell hired Rodney to play for International Dance Week in Port Townsend, Washington, and in 1983 Rodney was designated "Master Fiddler" by the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1985 Ferrell extended yet another invitation—this time to play for the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend, Washington. Teaching and playing at Fiddle Tunes is always a high point in Rodney's musical year and he has been on artistic staff there on a regular basis since the 1980s. This summer he will be working with the gifted guitarist Sandy Bradley, who played on Rodney's *New England Chestnuts* albums.

After *Airplang I* came out in 1985, Rodney was repeatedly hired to play for the Shetland Folk Festival because the organizer wanted Rodney's influence to rub off on the young fiddlers. While in Shetland, he began collaborations with musicians like Tom Anderson and Willie Hunter, Jr., who recorded some of Rodney's New England tunes.

When asked about his most unique collaborations, Rodney shared the following:

"Twyla Tharp somehow got hold of and listened to the 1973 recording of National Geographic Society's *Songs and Sounds of the Sea* album and fell in love with my fiddling on one of the medleys of tunes I played....She contacted me, saying that she had already choreographed a modern dance called 'Assorted Quartets' and wanted to know if I would play for it live at its debut in Boston. I was mind-blown by what she had choreographed. Every nuance, every bow effect, every trill and slide came out through the dance. It was pure connection between my fiddling and the dance interpretation of one of the leading choreographers of our time. (Footnote: The day before the Boston performance I had been sharpening tools for my upcoming UNH Violin-Making Institute course and deeply gouged my left index finger, requiring a late night trip to the ER. Stitched and bandaged, I went to Boston to perform the next day and removed part of the bandage from the tip of my finger to play for the show. I didn't mention the accident to Twyla. I wouldn't have missed that performance for anything.)"

And lest there be any doubt, Rodney has also fiddled on Prairie Home Companion:

"In 1996 Garrison Keillor wanted a local music tradition to be featured and contacted me to set up a band and a small contra dance event that would happen on stage. I organized a band with long-time friend and dance caller, Fred Breunig...eight contra dancers performed on stage. I remember we did 'Hull's Victory.'"

workshop for musicians in the San Francisco Bay area. Much of this started back East at the thriving VFW contra dance in Cambridge, Massachusetts:

"As I was playing for contra dances in New Hampshire and working with caller Tod Whittemore, Tod hired me to play for dances at the VFW Hall in Boston. There I met various members of the band 'Fiddle Fever'—Jay Ungar, Evan Stover, Matt Glaser, Russ Barenberg (guitar), and Molly Mason (bass). They would sometimes come to the dances and sit in. What I heard them doing with their western swing fiddle style inspired me to put more improvisation into my own fiddle style. Russ loved the sound of *Castles in the Air* (made in 1976) and the *New England Chestnuts* albums (made in 1980 and 1982) and came to play with me and Peter Barnes (piano) at those dances. This led to my forming the band 'Airplang' and the 1985 *Airplang* CD. This proved to be a pivotal CD, crossing over from my traditional-sounding fiddle style to a more contemporary sound." Playing for dances in Boston also brought Rodney into contact with bass player/ banjoist extraordinaire Stuart Kenney, who is featured on several of Rodney's recordings.

Around this time, Rodney, while teaching fiddle at the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend, Washington, met a rather bold and musically-gifted young man by the name of David Surette: "He came up to me (as a young guitar player in his early twenties) and said, 'You know, I like to play guitar and I like the way you play fiddle—how about we play together some time?' In the years after this encounter, David and I have recorded three Airdance CDs and an album called *New Leaf* and we still continue playing together." This is good news to anyone who has ever heard their duo work.

In 1999 Lynn Martin Graton, then director of the New Hampshire Arts Council, invited Rodney to represent the state at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC. While there Rodney joined various configurations of musicians to play for dances and private performances; "One of the most memorable moments I had during that Festival was playing a fast and furious 'Orange Blossom Special' at a late night staff party while being backed up by a Romanian musician. He literally went over to a potted plant, plucked a long blade of grass from the plant, put it up to his lips, blew hard, and backed me up, very loudly."

Graton was also behind Rodney's nomination for New Hampshire Artist Laureate, a position he will hold through 2016. The laureateship has given Rodney numerous opportunities to represent the music traditions of New Hampshire at various music and dance events around the country and beyond. How does it feel to hold this honor? "I'm proud that the State of New Hampshire has a position that honors the Arts and its importance in helping to define the culture and values of its people and I'm honored to be an official ambassador of that." And most recently, Rodney and his daughter Elvie were recorded and appear on the soundtrack of the popular video game "Bioshock Infinite" and honored by *Paste Magazine*, which has published and named Rodney's fiddle recording, *Airdance: Flying on Home*, as one of the top 20 Indie Recordings Must Haves.

If this soft-spoken man's cumulative accomplishments as a musician aren't enough, he is also a highly sought-after instrument maker. The beginnings of this parallel career were also sewn at Oberlin: "I made a hurdy gurdy, just from looking at pictures in the Oberlin library. And I made a hammered dulcimer and got extra credit to learn how to play it," he recalled with obvious satisfaction. According to Rodney, serious violin makers in the early 1970s were mainly in Europe, so Rodney, with help of his German professor, Stuart Frieber, found an apprenticeship in Austria in the Fall of 1972; there he spent a year as an apprentice. During the summer of 1973, he was lucky to have as his mentor Karl Roy, director of the Mittenwald Violin Making School in Bavaria. Roy set up a violin making program at UNH, and Rodney started as Roy's knife sharpener and continued apprenticing for six consecutive summers while simultaneously earning a B.S. in Civil Engineering. Rodney's luthier skills were also highly influenced by another maker:

"Carleen Hutchins came into our violin making class to demonstrate her techniques for analyzing the free tap tone frequencies of violin plates. I found her research and demo fascinating, perhaps because of my engineering bent. I then arranged to visit her at her summer house and workshop in Wolfeboro, New Hampshire, and then again at her home in Montclair, New Jersey. I became thoroughly knowledgeable in her techniques and have been using them in my violin making ever since."

Hutchins worked with Harvard physics professor Frederick Saunders, conducting experiments that analyzed vibrational patterns of violins and violin free plates (bellies and backs). In fact, Rodney continues to make use of a machine called the Chladni Oscillator or Sine Wave Generator, which helps him analyze visual vibrational patterns of sine waves passing through plates diagonally, vertically and cross-sectionally. He sprinkles ground black tea leaves on the open violin plates, and then studies the patterns that result as the sine waves pass through the wood. Rodney could not achieve what he has without being a perfectionist: his workshop contains a weighty binder in which he keeps notes and sketches of every instrument he has ever designed, down to tenths of a millimeter. It is this act of instrument making that brings together all of his skills as a musician, engineer, and craftsman.

In addition to a life filled with dance gigs, concertizing, and instrument making, Rodney has also carved out the time to mentor young players. One of his most promising students is a twelve-year-old boy from Frankestown, New Hampshire, named Keegan Zelko:

"Keegan is going to go very far musically. He's dedicated and hard-working...whatever I show and teach him, whether it's a flashy 'Madame Vanoni' in Eb with bouncing bows, Tom Anderson's beautiful air, 'Da Slockit Light,' or one of my composed tunes like 'Schmoozin' Jig' or 'Road to Ottawa,' he comes to the next lesson and plays it like he's

known it his whole life. Sometimes I have a hard time knowing if it's Keegan or me playing; he has such a fine ear. We learn tunes by ear in the lessons. That way we can focus on the nuances of the phrases, embellishments, dynamics, and bow work without the distraction of looking at notes on a page."

Rodney has also received numerous teaching grants from the NH Arts Council under the Master/Apprenticeship Program. Talented fiddlers Brendan Carey Block and Paul Lizotte are among his past students. Rodney's also excited about his work with younger dance musicians like Max Newman, whose guitar vamping is featured on his newest and highly improvisational CD, wittily titled *Stringrays*. Rodney has traveled a long way from his musical days with Dudley Laufman's Canterbury Country Dance Orchestra or playing for Ralph Page, but he's left none of these experiences behind him:

"These were my inspirations. I was taught to play the tradition with respect, but also be open to new ideas. I have written a lot of tunes myself that keep the traditional feeling true to heart but also leave room for new takes on old ideas. *The Portland Collection(s)*

have captured a lot of the new tune writing that is taking place in the contra dance scene today. Several of my original fiddle compositions have been included in these *Collections*. I think a tradition that is a 'living' tradition is so important."

These days Rodney's life appears to have achieved an almost perfect artistic balance, not unlike the arrangement of black tea leaves on the Chladni plates that he regularly consults while in his workshop. He has been making instruments for Stamell Strings in Amherst, Massachusetts, for over twenty-five years, and on week-days he can be found in his Antrim farmhouse in a state of blissful absorption, amidst the tools and wood shavings of his trade.

For more information on Rodney and his instruments, visit www.rodneymiller.net/

[New Hampshire musician and story chaser Sarah Jane Nelson strives for the same perfect balance, but continues to live a life of artistic disarray. When not writing, or playing for dances, Sarah derives great joy from singing and fiddling in libraries.]

Cloud 9

By Rodney Miller. "Cloud Nine is included in *The Portland Collection Vol. 3* (www.theportlandcollection.com). It was my goal in writing Cloud Nine to combine a New England flavor à la Cole's fiddle tunebook with a Québécois-style tune and then to make it all sound 21st Century."

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The musical score for "Cloud 9" is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of five staves of music. The chords and first/second endings are as follows:

- Staff 1: Chords D⁶, Em⁷, A, D⁶, Em⁷, A.
- Staff 2: Chords D, (Dmaj⁷) (D⁷), G, Gm, A. First ending: 1. D⁶, A, D.
- Staff 3: Second ending: 2. A, D. Chords D⁶, Em⁷.
- Staff 4: Chords A, D⁶.
- Staff 5: Chords Em⁷, 1. A⁷, D, 2. A⁷, D.