

Fiddle Infusion

by Pat Lowers

If you had asked me last month to play a tune by ear, I would have told you I can't, that it's not possible for me because I'm tone-deaf and can't hear the music. After one short week at Valley of the Moon Fiddle Camp, I have reversed my opinion and my answer is now a resounding YES, I CAN DO THAT!!!

My nerves were taut as I motored through the winding turns of Highway 9 to Camp Campbell in the beautiful Santa Cruz Mountains, south of San Jose. Unsure of what to expect, I was prepared for a dismal time struggling to learn tunes by ear while my fingers fumbled for the notes on my fiddle. I missed the turn into camp and had to take in a bit more scenery before turning around and finding the somewhat hidden entrance. The road was narrow, curvy, and went uphill until I reached the lodge where I was to unload my voluminous belongings. After looking at the cabins, I realized there would not be room for anyone else if I brought all that stuff inside, so I pared it down to one large wheelbarrow load of blankets, bags, instruments, suitcases, and such.

Primitive is a pretty apt phrase for the accommodations, but it was not unpleasant for anyone under 5'10". After meeting my Marys (my roommates for the week were Mary Ann, Mary Ellen, Mary, and Monica - I'm changing my name for next year), I set out to see what this camp was all about. It didn't take long to get oriented as the camp is very well laid out, with the community bathrooms/showers just a short hike from the cabin in one direction and the mess hall a somewhat longer hike in the other. That turned out to be a blessing since I needed a good hike after each hearty meal, well, really after the desserts.

Since I was certain I could not play music by ear, I entered the Slow Class on Saturday morning, which took place outdoors by the picnic area. (You really can swat mosquitoes with a violin bow.) After a bit, I realized it was too slow, so for the next session, I attended the Moderate Class, a good idea because it turned out to be indoors with real chairs instead of logs to sit on. I stayed in that class all week. It was one of the smartest moves I've ever made because every day for six days I spent 1 ½ hours with Alasdair Fraser, Martin Hays, and Rodney Miller - each! It just doesn't get any better than that.

It was a stretch for me since I was not used to learning by listening and have always considered myself a visual person, in need of pictures, words, and notes in order to function. How we pigeonhole ourselves is quite amazing, and so unnecessary since all I ever had to do was try it. But I was convinced it would not work, and so handicapped myself for years by not exploring every possible way to learn music. That's all in the past now and I am free to learn and play and truly enjoy my fiddle. Somehow, I can't stop smiling.

Each day was a new adventure as I learned from these three masters - each of whom had a very different style. Alasdair was calm and decisive, all business and let's get on with it. Martin was dreamy and philosophical, telling us to feel the music and not worry about technique or rules. Rodney was energetic and brought a fresh style of music I had not previously encountered. He had us performing bowing drills to show how to control the bow, and amused us with his attempts at describing how some pieces flowed. Each man brought something very valuable to the lesson, and each expanded my knowledge of fiddling and of music in general. I got so much more than my money's worth I am sending a check to the camp scholarship fund to ease my guilt.

Those weren't the only classes. Ed Miller gave a wonderful and complete history of Scottish music, plus a lot of history of Scotland along with it. He sang to us in his beautiful voice and shared the tunes of other Scottish singers as we sat in a redwood grove watching the squirrels and birds frolic in the bushes. We all sang, even me, especially after Alasdair showed me one day that I can carry a tune with my voice as well. Ed formed a chorus calling us the Redwood Grove Singers and we performed a couple of tunes at the ending concert. Not only was it a thrill for me, but it amazed my friends who were in the audience.

If that wasn't enough, there were classes in dancing, cello, percussion, and guitar. It was way more than anyone could possibly do, but I tried anyway. I wanted to be everywhere and do everything-to take it all in and absorb as much as possible in the short time we had. I'll be sleeping for the next month to recover from my folly.

Every night, and most of the days, we jammed. And I do mean jammed. The instructors demonstrated their styles one evening, the rec room was rocking every night, way past my ability to stay vertical. There was even a regular jam in the ladies shower room - great acoustics, I understand. Where else can you go to the toilet and be entertained by terrific musicians rather than elevator music! Janette Duncan offered her annual midnight soup, and I volunteered to help as it sounded like fun. What an understatement. First Ed Miller serenaded us sitting on a stool in the kitchen while we chopped veggies, then after a while Alasdair and Martin showed up with their fiddles, found some crates to sit on, were joined by an eclectic cellist from Berkeley, a visiting fiddler of some repute, and others. Before you knew it we were jamming to beat the band, 50 people were crowded into that kitchen, I was playing bodhran using a paper plate and plastic spoon, and it was hot! (I do mean jamming hot). The session went on for a very long time and finally

dispersed into smaller sessions in other rooms or even outside. I have no recollection of when I went to bed that night, if at all.

The next day during lunch, Joe Craven who was the percussion teacher, started making rhythm noises. A few people picked up on it, adding their own styles and before you knew it the entire room of 250 people were beating out rhythms on anything they could get their hands on, shaking sugar jars, tapping cups and plates, clapping hands, you name it. Then we all started moving in time to the rhythm, marching up and down among the tables, on the tables, around the room. There wasn't a bobcat left within miles of the place when we finally fell exhausted but laughing to our seats or the floor, whichever was handiest.

Apparently, there has been some teasing going on among the instructors for several years and this year was the capper of payback as Martin Hayes, yes, THE Martin Hayes appeared at the dining hall one night in drag with a bodacious blonde wig doing an imitation of one of the Slow Play teachers, Hanneke, known for her creativity in the world of pranks. Another time, the final episode of Survivor got a new twist as some very talented folks parodied the show in fine fashion while managing to also poke fun at several camp members. Humor abounded as the skits continued with an evening of Neal Gow Meets Robert Burns. Our own Rodney Miller donned a kilt for the very first time. Of course, the lender of the kilt forgot to coach Rodney in proper maneuvering while wearing a kilt and we all got a good laugh the first time he tried to sit down. For those who don't know Rodney, he's very tall, well over six feet, and the kilt he borrowed belonged to a fellow somewhat shorter than that. Use your imagination on this one.

You can't have a gathering of Scottish-minded folk without a ceilidh, so we had one. My cabin mates and I performed a rousing rendition of the old show tune, Valley of the Moon, with our own lyrics of course. Creativity and inventiveness abounded as the skits were uproariously funny and plentiful. This was interspersed with some very talented offerings by many of the campers - from age 5 to 75.

Everything came to a climax on Friday night when 175 fiddlers took the stage at Cabrillo College in Aptos, accompanied by cellos, guitars, percussion, piano, and singers. The air was electric and adrenaline ran rampant as we regaled the sold-out audience with all of the tunes we had learned all week-without a single printed note anywhere. It was awesome! I'm sure the roof lifted off its foundation when we played. Rather than end the concert, we marched off the stage, still playing and went right out the front door pied-piper style with the audience in tow. Music and jamming continued into the night-it may still be going on for all I know. I do know it's still going on in my head, and will be for a very long time.

I can truly record this experience as one of the highlights of my life. Burned into my memory is the sight of walking through the woods and coming upon Martin Hayes standing under a tree playing the fiddle with one of the campers; Alasdair and Rodney standing on the dining hall porch in a dueling fiddles jam; Ed Miller strumming his guitar in a grove and singing of far away and long forgotten times; the family with five children, each more talented than the next; and the ten year old girl from Alaska who sat in front of me every day, kept me informed of the current tune, and showed me where to place my fingers on the fiddle. That was the best part-the coming together of people of all ages, from varied backgrounds, with a common bond-MUSIC.