

AN INTERVIEW WITH BENNY THOMASSON

Conducted at the National Old-Time Fiddlers' Association Contest and Festival, Weiser, Idaho, June, 1973, by David Garelick, Michael Mendelson, and Nancy Dols, and transcribed by Michael Mendelson. Abridged slightly by the Editor.

David Garelick: How long have you been fiddling?

BT: Oh, I've been fiddling for... fifty-nine years.

DG: Did you learn it from your family?

BT: My family, yeah, you see all of my aunts and uncles, grand-dad, and grand-mother, my dad, my sisters and brothers were fiddlers and musicians. Some of it had to rub off somewhere, I guess.

Michael Mendelson: Where was this, Benny? What part of Texas?

BT: Well, in about the central part. Then I moved up when I was about fifteen years old to Arlington, Texas, which is in the north-central part there. Gatesville, Texas is where I was,...

DG: Did they have fiddle contests in those days, or was fiddling just something people did when they got together?

BT: No, strange as it might seem, they was having fiddling contests there. My dad, you know thirty, forty, or fifty miles seemed like plum across the United States in those days. But he'd make it some way to get to those fiddling contests and he was pretty sharp. He'd come out in the top just about all the time.

MM: Do you play similar to the way your dad played?

BT: Well, no. I'll tell you what, see those old tunes, back in those days was just little two-part tunes and they never had any variation to 'em. Now I play the same old tunes, but then I have arranged variations of the same parts in different positions on the fiddle, see. And like you'd be playing an old tune there, like "Dusty Miller", or something, and the low part there, and then you get up there on your higher positions and make it sound... get a little bit different variation, and get a good sound out of it. And it don't make it come back to the same old monotonous, two-part deals there, you see.

MM: I hear a lot of people doing your tunes now... you seem to be quite popular.

BT: Well, I'll tell you what. I started out... I'm a lot older than some of these hoys. I started out in Texas, from the time I can remember, to improving on these old tunes, you see. Improving, working them over, just kept on doing... there's no end to what you can do to one, by just keep working on it. And from that, from the time I started 'till now, I'm still working on improvements. And the big percent of the fiddlers just take a tune and that's all there is to it. They just play, you see. They don't try to make any improvements. They play it just over the same way, every time.

DG: Isn't that because at one time all the tunes were used for dancing? They didn't really need to do that sort of stuff.

BT: They didn't need to... not necessary. But then when we begin to get in tough competition in fiddle contests, you always had to try to be better next year than you was last year. And what you could do, you'd play a tune over in the contest, and if you... [interruption] and let's see. I was going to finish with the deal there. The reason was that I worked on them so hard, I had some tough competition down there in Texas. Old boys that had been, that were older than I was, you know

DG: Who were some of the competitors?

BT: Major Franklin, was my worst...

DG: Is he older than you?

BT: Major is four years older than I am. But he was a tough old fiddler, boy. And he was a dandy. He's still a good fiddler. He sure is.

DG: Did you beat Major Franklin in a lot of contests?

BT: Oh, yeah. Yeah, after I finally got to the point where I could beat him,... well I was just a young fellow then... we'd have it nip-and-tuck you know, he might beat me one year, and I'd beat him the next. It'd just depend on how we felt.

DG: Did you know a fiddler named Ervin Solomon?

BT: Ervin? Yeah, I sure did.

DG: Was he a tough competitor too?

BT: He was an awful good fiddler, Ervin was. Now his two boys, Norman and Vernon... you know them... they're good fiddlers too. Old Ervin... Ervin never made too many contests. Occasionally you'd see him around a fiddle contest. But he rated real well when he played in those contests.

DG: What were contests like then, did they have to play three tunes like they do here?

BT: Yeah, about the same... Only the thing of it is, back in those days you didn't have to play too much of a variety of tunes, you see. Variety of types of tunes. Like waltzes, or jigs, reels, or hornpipes. You most generally had your choice, so you could play three of anything you wanted to. And ordinarily they'd play waltzes and everything like they do now, but they didn't have to, it wasn't compulsory for them to do it there.

DG: When did you start developing this Texas style that's so recognizable...that's so different from everthing else?

BT: Now I'll tell you a little story about that. There was a fiddle contest in Dallas. I guess I was about 18 years, 17-18 years old. And I thought, boy I was just a good fiddler, you know when you're that age, and you do play... pretty well, you think, by doggies its going to take somebody pretty hard to beat you, you know, I got up there, there's 250 fiddlers.Howdy Forrester, Georgia Slim, all those guys.

And the top fiddlers in the nation you might say. And then I got up there, and boy, I laid that "Grey Eagle" on there, goin' and a-comin'. I come to find out that nobody even recognized me. The judges...[laughter] didn't even scratch me. So from that time on, I went to work on that thing. I said, "well," to myself I said, "self, you got to do something now"... [laughter]... And I just made it a point to keep, to continue to work, working, working, working on those tunes. That's how come Texas fiddlin' (came) to be discovered.

MM: Do you recall any people that (were) really strong influences... anybody in particular? Or just...

BT: Well, I'd say that... yeah there was quite a few. Major Franklin was one of my strongest influences. Old Eck Robertson, you've heard of him. Gillilan, they was old fiddlers. Matt Brown. Matt Brown was the one that actually made "Done Gone".

MM: Didn't he do "Lime Rock" also?

BT: He did "Lime Rock". And Matt, and Kelly made the "Kelly Waltz". They used to call it the "Kelly-Brown Waltz". And I've seen those people, when I was just real young. I don't remember 'em, but my dad's played with them. But they're the ones that made "Kelly Waltz", and a bunch of those old tunes, you know.

MM: What about... swing fiddle. Did any of that creep in?

BT: Oh yeah, I got into that when I went and played for dances and stuff like that you see. And I had, I was in demand, to play with different type hands, you know. I played with Joe Holly that played with Bob Wills. We played together a couple of years in a swing band...

DG: Did you know Sleepy Johnson?

BT: Oh Lord, yeah! I knew Sleepy ever since I was 16 years old...

DG: Has that western swing style affected the way you work out traditional, the older fiddle tunes?

BT: No, I think it really helps it, because it... in that western style, western swing, you have to have perfect timing. It really works and helps your timing. Actually, used to, before I'd play in a fiddle contest, I'd play a swing tune, that'd bring me down to my perfect timing, you see, on these hoedowns. I never told anybody that before, but it does. You play something like "Draggin' the Bow" or something like that, you know, and you've got a "sock" rhythm time on that you see. Positive timing.

DG: Oh yeah, you can't help it, even in a tune like "I Don't Love Nobody", you get into that.

BT: It automatically runs into a swing there you see. And then it calls your attention into an actual swing. When you play a tune like that, well you're geared down to the spot where you can really get into an old hoedown.

MM: Do you ever listen to any jazz? Like Joe Venuti, or Stephane Grappelly.

BT: Oh Lord, yeah! That guy runs me nuts, boy.

MM: Venuti is,... pretty...

BT: He is something else!

MM: ...incredible, he's funny' He's got a sense of humor when he plays.

BT: I know it. Grappelly is one of the other guys... Django Rheinhardt and Grappelly. I tell you one thing,... them old boys was something else! I just go out into space when I go to hear them guys play... Well now, old Django, he was way ahead of his time on that guitar. Way ahead of his time. He done some things on that thing, and he was handicapped, you know, with that hand all beat up.
[pause]

DG: Have you ever had any violin, you know, any actual formal lessons?

BT: None, whatever. Not any.

DG: So you don't read music either?

BT: Well, I'll tell you what. I learned to read hornpipes, and reels and jigs, myself, without any teacher. What I did, I learned the lines and spaces. And you know how I learned to read those hornpipes? I played "Fisher's" and stuff like that, you know. And I got 'em down and began, I knew just a little bit about the measurements you know, and spaces and where they was located. And I did know where the notes were located on the fiddle, by just natural learning, you know. And I picked those things up, now I got to where I could pick out them old tough hornpipes... But I did it myself, I mean I didn't never have any training.

MM: You haven't had then any formal training as far as technique, and bouncing the bow...

BT: No, no, I accumulated what I've got. Just through picking up the mistakes that I was doing. In other words, if you're handicapped in any way, well I worked on the handicap position that I would be in, on some, maybe the way to hold a bow, to get the best action out of it. Or how to note and everything like that.

MM: Then you must have listened to a lot of different kinds of music.

BT: Oh, I have. Any kind that's good, I listen to it. When they do a good job of it, I don't care what it is. It's good to me.

DG: Do you listen to a lot of other fiddle music, besides the Texas style?

BT: Oh yeah. Any of its good. I like Canadian music. I like... well I like classical music. I like violin. Florian ZaBach.

MM: ... I heard of him. He was a jazz...

BT: Jazz, classic...

MM: What about Paul Nero? Did you ever hear of him?... He did a tune called "Hot Canary"... a few years ago.

BT: Well now, I'll tell you who, old ZaBach done the same thing. And he done a around on it... and man, he'd tear you all to pieces (when he got on it)... He used to have an hour's program on Sunday on the television. Years ago. And when that'd come on, I'd shut the door and set in front of that T.V.... he slayed me, every time he'd play.

MM: I really feel sorry that swing fiddle, you know, jazz fiddle is not around any more.

BT: Me too, yeah. You know,...

MM: ..."Sweet Georgia Brown" and...

BT: "Kansas City Kitty"...

MM: "Stompin' at the Savoy"... all those tunes. Those were really great!

BT: Oh, they were really good... Did you know nowadays, I play those things. We played them up at the schoolhouse, the other night...

DG: Yeah, I heard you doing some of those.

BT: And, people enjoy 'em. They like them. But its not around any more. They've just quit it.

DG: That brings up... that's a pretty interesting point. We went to a contest at Fort Worth about 2 years ago... and after the contest, all the fiddlers were jamming... and that's what they were doing...

BT: Jamming and they were playing... playing western swing...

DG: Norman Solomon and Dick Barret, they were all doing "Kansas City Kitty". They were just out-doing each other. Just... you thought one guy had it made, and then the other guy came and he was even more incredible.

BT: ...He'd just out-do him.

DG: Was Dick Barret one of your students? Did he learn a lot from you?

BT: Well, he's picked up a lot of stuff from me. He'll admit that he did. But, I was older you see, and naturally, the younger person will pick up stuff from anybody, you might say. But I was around him a whole lot there, and I hope it helped him. He made a remark the other day, he said "If I don't do this right, its your fault, because I learned it from you." ...we've had a lot of fun together, Dick and I have.

MM: When did Dick start playing? Has he been playing all his life? Or did he just pick it up...

BT: ...Well he's been playing several years... he played western swing there for a long time. And then he went to playing hoedowns... and jigs, reels and hornpipes, and stuff... But he's got wild on that thing. That goes to show you, if you're a good western swing fiddler, it don't take long to pick up those hoedowns and stuff.

MM: I'd like to ask you something about, regional styles... Now when you started playing, evidently you developed your style. What was happening before then? Do you...

BT: Well, once in a while you'll see an old fellow, nowadays, but... Like I said a while ago, they'd have those old tunes like "Turkey in the Straw" or stuff like that... and it was the same old thing. Now I'll tell you another thing, used to, a long time ago, my grandfather kept his fiddle cross-tuned all the time. They had a lot of cross-tuning you know, back in those days. They played a lot of those, jigs and stuff in cross-tuning, because it gave a little bit more, ringing sound to a fiddle. But,... then the styles, different styles like you say there... you mean different locations in the country?

MM: Yeah, right...

BT: Well, what happens, there'll be a... some fiddler in one area, isolated from another one you see. And a real good fiddler, that people begin to pick up after his style, and they begin to work to that, you see. And not knowing what style is further on down the country there, you see, that's what causes the big difference. They'll play in a... just a different style. Even back... I've been all over the place. Missouri, back in there, they've got a different style. Texas is a different style. Oklahoma is a little different. Even as close to Texas as it is. It's a close resemblance to a Texas style.

MM: Do you think regional styles are getting less distinct now?

BT: I think so. I think it's all winding up to a, one situation. I think it'll eventually wind up where, you know it's not far from one place to another anymore. And the distances are so much closer now, and communications and things like that... people...

DG: Do you think eventually, there'll just be one national style?

BT: Eventually I think they'll come down to one style, or be close to it there. The one that people like the most... that's got more to it. I think they'll eventually keep on till they brush these old things up where they'll just be pretty good doings, sooner or later.

MM: Do you think contests are responsible for it, or is it just, do you think it sounds better, just in general? Or both?

BT: Well, I'd say that has something to do with it. 'Cause that's where all the fiddlers from all over meet, you know. And then you take a fellow, winning a contest. Naturally, people are... if they go to these contests, they're going to try to play like him, as much as they can.

DG: ...try to play like him... Do you think radio and records has helped that too. 'Cause I know I could buy your record, and I could learn your tunes...

BT: Yeah, sure... And I'll tell you another thing, that helps is, a tape... like you'll be playin' out there and people will tape it... maybe they live in Nashville... or in the southern part of the country, all over the country, you see. And... so that's what scatters it around. I've talked to people today... Bud Meredith. Do you know Bud Meredith?

DG: Yeah...

BT: He came to my house, 15 years ago. And I made a tape for him. And, he scattered that all over the area where he lived, you see. People re-taped it you know. I met a boy here last year that... he said he got it, he... had that, recorded tape of Bud's you know, that I made for him... when he was 13 years old. And he was about, well, it'd been 16 years ago, you know. So he'd a-been 30 years old now, you

see... So that's, that's the way that stuff gets scattered around. You... people picking up tunes you play, and so on... All the way across the country.

MM: I've noticed that nobody plays, or very few people play like the South-eastern style in the contests... Something like... Clark Kessinger is the only one I can think of right off hand, but Clayton McMichen used to play that more...

BT: Yeah, yeah...

MM: ...more shuffles and things. Why do you think that's falling out?

BT: Well, I don't know. They did an awful good job of it, there it seems to me, like. But I think that... modifying those old tunes, right there, a little bit more... helped to... to bring on what, the modification and everything... although old Clark had a good situation on those hoedowns and stuff like that, because... he would play them over one way, you know, and come back around and change them over. The fact of the matter is, I've learned a lot of tunes off of Clark Kessinger's old records... Of course I've changed them up some since then, you see... And what you do... you learn one of those tunes and then, re-model it to suit yourself there, you see. But you still can recognize, like "Tugboat", that old "Tugboat" tune... Clark played a couple of parts to it, there. I got it in four, five different areas there, you see...

DG: I've never heard anybody do that outside of Texas...

BT: Well that's, that's where it come from. I learned it... when I was 15 years old. I learned that off a record, Clark Kessinger... [pause]

DG: How do you feel about, ah, fiddlers around the state of Washington, now that you're living out here?

BT: Well listen, there's good fiddlers out here. They play different than what we do down there.

DG: Are you learning a lot of their tunes, or... ?

BT: Yeah, I've picked up some tunes out here, sure have... I've been teaching a lot of kids out here.

DG: They all found you! [laughter]

BT: ...You know little Loretta Brank, that won first there... ?

DG: Yeah, oh yeah...

BT: I was, I started teaching her when I first come out here.

DG: Oh my gosh, she's a good fiddler.

BT: She sure is... And the night before this contest, that tune that she played last, the hoedown, I taught her part of it, you see. And then I give her those little, triples and stuff.... She was afraid to play, at first. Then the next time she played, she played it and done a good job of it. [pause]

MM: Who else is out there, Joe, Pan....

BT: Panczerwski... Joe's a good fiddler...

MM: ... Now he's up there isn't he? ... I mean, up in ... Washington.

BT: Oh yeah, yeah, he's in that area. He lives, ah, Enumclaw! [pause]

DG: Do you know a guy named, ah, Kelly Kirksy? Do you know about him?

BT: Where does he live?

DG: Santa Rosa, California.

BT: I know that Kelly Kirksey, there...the name's awfully familiar.

DG: He's the, he started the Federation of Old-Time Fiddling Judges.

BT: Yeah, yeah! That's right.

DG: ...and I was talking to him. And he has some very conservative ideas about fiddling... But he [Kelly] thinks some of these contests are,... in his opinion, they're ruining old-time fiddling. Now he says the real old stuff, the way they used to play in the dances there, people aren't playing that anymore.

[?] : *It depends on what age group you're in...*

BT: Well,... yeah, that's it... Now if you're ninety... [laughter] ... if you're up in the nineties, or somewhere like that, that's just like the Wright brothers started out, with that old plane they couldn't hardly get off the ground, you see. They made several attempts to get that thing off the ground. You know, young people coming up, learning to fiddle, they want to do everything they can... in more modern ways, you know. Times changes. And I think... that as time changes, music should change to fit the times. I mean they'll take these tunes that I'm playing now and..., .30-40 years from then, I couldn't even touch 'em, see. Well, I like that, I mean that'd be fine. I don't want 'em to stick with just the same old... stay in a rut all the time. [laughter] Of course now, it's like George Davis, was down in New Mexico, and he told some of them down there they made... made mention of the same situation.... about stickin' to the old, old traditional tunes... But we play the old traditional tunes, but we just got 'em sort of... greased up a little bit and smoothed... [laughter].

DG: ...streamlined...

BT: Yeah, streamlined...

DG: Well, I think a lot of people are saying they should preserve the old ones before they... completely fade away, you know.

BT: ... Well... well, it'd be good, it'd be good to. And then they could go back and, ... listen to 'em on tape or something, ... or on a record, or something like that. It's good preserving things like that... old traditionals... That's the reason why it's kind of hard for... a guy like me to get up and win a fiddling contest, where that is ... is in order you see. Now I went to Billings, Montana. Played a job out there, about a month or two ago... a couple of months ago. And I gave a fiddle workshop there. It was the first one they'd ever had. There's a lot of old people up there you know, old fellers, that plays the

fiddle and used to play... I explained the old tunes, like they were played back then, and played, a part of an old tune you know, "Turkey in the Straw". I used it for an example. And these old fellers, they just didn't like it much at all, to start with, see. I played it just the old plain way, and then I just went all over, you know and played on it... Played a good, pretty sounding "Turkey in the Straw". They begin to smile you know, and ... [laughter] ... they said they was going to get their old fiddles out, and start back to playing the fiddle, and trying to get with it you see. So its, a pretty good deal... You know, they never realized anything like that until they see it actually happen, you see... See what has happened to a situation... They can't visualize, like that old "Turkey in the Straw"... [hums a few bars of "Turkey in the Straw"] ...down the neck, learn it back on in there and come on back out of it, you see... [laughter] ... and they like it like that I think ... A bunch of them come up and talked to me after it was over, and said, "Now then, I'm going to get my old fiddle out and go to workin'."

MM: Have you ever done any Bluegrass fiddling?

BT: Some, some... Yeah, I'll tell you what, I could pick it up pretty quick, I believe. I've already got the bow style there. I mean I can do the bow work on that thing. See, you use a different type of bowing in Bluegrass. I've done learned it...

MM: Right... How about some specifics, ... there's a couple of schools of Bluegrass fiddling. There's like Byron Berline, sort of "old-timey", and then there's Kenny Baker, which is really sweet. And then there's the strange ones like Scotty Stoneman and Richard Greene.

BT: Yeah, there's --gosh there's different styles in Bluegrass. And there's different styles and patterns...

MM: Vassar Clements is another one.

BT: ... and all of its good to me, I like it all.

MM: Some people, especially when you get into the extremes like Richard Greene and Scotty Stoneman ...you know, really start to get... worried... for lack of a better word.

BT: Well, I know it. Well you see...that makes you think, well gee whiz, we'll never be able to do stuff like that. [laughter] ... but it's all there, and all you got to do is bow it, and take after it...

DG: How is the bowing that different, in Bluegrass? ... or is that hard to explain...?

BT: No, it's a up bow, down bow, up bow, down bow. So many notes up, and so many back, you see. Then you get faster. [hums a few bars as an example]... like that you see.

MM: A lot more notes to a bow than in old time?

BT: Ah... no, actually what it is, you make... I don't know how to explain it, hardly.... But anyway, you got it anyway where you don't just whip it off, like this... yeah it's more notes to the stroke.

DG: It always sounds like it's a smoother kind of fiddling.

BT: Yeah, it is. That's the way to smooth it up, you see. And you can play a lot faster without chopping you see. It's not choppy, but it's a slide up and slide back, when you're goin' over a fast tune.

DG: What about, a lot of people talk about "Texas long-bow style". What does "long-bow" actually mean?

BT: Well, that's just the old thing there. That's the one we accumulated there, I guess. Through ignorance of what we were doing... A different type of bowing on a, different tune, to make it sound different. I'll fit the stroke, the long stroke fits in certain places. And the short stroke. The long bow is one that ties in with the different strokes, with the different tunes, which placed in the right place there, is where you get your expression, and drive.

DG: Is "long-bow" called that because you try to get a lot of notes in the same bowing direction?

BT: Yeah, either that or ... you'll make, to make an expression... to make a certain portion of the tune stick out, stand out, you know, put a high point in it in other words, you use a longer bow...

DG: Yeah, that, I don't know, it seems like sort of a modern invention too, because...

BT: Yeah, I guess it is...

DG: ...you listen to old fiddlers, like the old, in the twenties, on the records that they made then, there all short bow, all choppy, sawing...

BT: ...short bow, chopping...

DG: ...oh, some of the better ones use kind of a shuffle... there's a round kind of a bowing pattern.

Nancy Dols: You use a lot of single bows, though, but it doesn't sound choppy.

BT: [laughs] Yeah, in a lot of places it's... to make it come out, and pep it up. You have to mix it up. I don't know how to explain it there, but it...

MM: You use a really loose... the thumb and just your first finger, right?

BT: Yeah, thumb and first finger.

ND: And your little finger... I noticed... and your middle fingers don't even touch.

BT: ... I use a [?] on the ferrule, on the frog, instead of back up on the bow... See, I've got a, more of a pivot there, you see. You can pivot your bow, and let it go along to the end of your stroke. And what actually happens, if you let that, your wrist, a loose wrist, will let you get your note timing to the end, a lot better. In other words, you can go on out, and while you're coming back, you can still be, go to the end of the measurement of the note, you see. Loose wrist... That makes your timing better.

DG: What kind of tunes do you enjoy doing the most? Hoedown tunes, or...

BT: Ah, not necessarily

DG: ...or swing tunes

BT: ...sweet tunes...

DG: *I mean swing, western swing type...*

BT: ... yeah, swing tunes... Yeah, it depends on what type of people you're around. I mean, what they like, is what I like to do.... I played with Phil and Vivian [Williams] up there in Seattle, a time or two. They play at a deal up there, you know. Those people up there really do like it. Just played mostly hoedowns, you know, and one thing or another.

DG: *When you're learning a new tune, how do you work it out in the sense of, you know, streamlining it. Putting in all the things into it that you do? Does it take a lot of years, or can you actually work it out in an afternoon?*

BT: No, it don't take too long. I mean, you learn it, and, affect the way it actually goes, you know. And then as you go along, every time you play it maybe, you'll find another place, and it will sound a little different. You don't do it all of the sudden, like, I mean. Sometimes, on a plain tune, well, I can take it, just learn the, basic part of it, there, then just run it any way you want to, see. You'll eventually get to play it better.

DG: *Do you work out a tune in the sense that you always play it the same way, or are you continually changing them... the tunes.*

BT: Well, I've been accused of continually changing them... [laughter] ... I taught this Bartow Riley, you know, you've probably heard of him... I started teaching him, and he was thirty-three years old. What happened, I'd learn him a tune, you know. When he'd come back ... I'd play it again for him, and he'd say "That's not the way you played that tune before!" [laughter] He'd say "Here's the way you used to do it!"... But I never do think what I'm doing. I just play 'em off, you know. I might play 'em different every time I play 'em. Just a little bit. Some, some phrases, and variations

MM: I was just going to ask, do you play any other instruments? Other than fiddle?

BT: Oh, not to speak of. I mean I wouldn't be qualified... I play standard guitar a little. But... not enough... Oh, I could keep you from just going plum off the bank there... [laughter] ... but I wouldn't be qualified to... play rhythm behind anybody, you see.

DG: Have you ever judged in a contest?

BT: Oh, yeah. Lots of times.

DG: What are the things you listen for in another fiddler, when you're judging?

BT: I listen for... really, arrangements of the tune, tone, the tone he gets out of it, and his timing. Things like that. I mean, and his arrangement of, arrangement of his parts. How they come in.

DG: *But do you follow these patterns that they set up, like at Weiser, where you have fifty points, or twenty-five points for timing and ...*

BT: Well, you have to, you have to go along that line to be able to,... get your points measured up. In other words... actually, a lot of these things, if a man makes a little mistake, when he's playing, and if he's a good fiddler, I don't hold that against him. Because anybody can make a little flub. Unless it gets to the point where, you've got two fiddlers that are, exactly the same, pointed the same. In other

words, they rate the same in your mind. One of them will either have to make a little mistake, or play a little better tune or something like that, to get him.

DG: Yeah, I always wondered about that. When they get, when they get you and Dick Barret...

BT: ...When it gets down to that point...

DG: ... and[J. C.] Broughton, and all these people, how do they tell whose...

BT: Well, it's, timing and stuff like that, you know...

DG: Yeah. Do you think that system's a good way of judging though, with the points?

BT: Well, it's about the only way that you could I mean, to measure up a ... to tell how high a feller rated you know. But the thing is, to keep in mind what points one had there, before he'd get to the next one you see. In other words, keep a record of your points, to average there you see ...the one you gave, [?] remember what he did, you see, and then the next one to come along, might be a better fiddler. And then you may get on down the line, and this one that's playing now, you see, you'd forget what points you would give a man, but you'd think about him when the other one played, he'd be just a little better, maybe... And you'd look up to your points, how many points you gave him, and either raise him or lower him... It's a hard thing to judge on that. [laughter] I'm going to judge in Truth or Consequences, down there...

DG: They just had one... Are they having another one?

BT: I know, but they're having a national, a real big one down there. And I'm judging in that one.

DG: How about that. I didn't know about that one.

BT: ...judged the one they had down there this time, but I had this job in Billings, Montana. I had to let that one go. And they asked me if I'd judge the other one, so I'll have to go down and judge it, you see.

DG: Are you doing a lot of playing besides, playing in contests? Just performing and...

BT: Oh yeah, they, people want me to go somewhere and play all the time. They have these little shows... fiddle gatherings... They've got community houses all over the country, you know. They'll have one in this part, plus there's one over here, and everywhere else

DG: Are you a professional musician, or were you...?

BT: Never have been. It's always been a sideline, a hobby...

DG: Even when you played for dances, that was just something you did... spare time...

BT: Oh, it was just something I picked up, you know. Just spare time. [pause]

*ND: Last night I heard you jamming with Herman Johnson, and you were doing "Durang's Hornpipe."
And also Dick Barret, I guess, right?*

BT: Yeah.

ND: *...And I noticed that your version and Herman Johnson's version of "Durang's Hornpipe" was pretty close, but his was different. And I heard somebody that was listening say "Ah, he plays it the old way:" I was really curious...*

BT: Said that I played it the old way...?

ND: *No, said that Dick Barret played it the old way.*

MM: *Was that Dick, or was that Roy lee...*

BT: Yeah, it was Roy Cowan. Well, he's just got a different version on it, there...

ND: *'Cause I was curious, because I heard somebody say it was the "old way" and I...*

BT: Well now, most of it was. I mean he left out, there's one little part in there that we don't never play the old way. It goes down into a different key there. I mean I could play it note for note like it used to be played, still. But then I skip away from it on account of... there's just so much more to it this other way

ND: ...when you don't go into...

BT: ...you've got a better chord arrangement, there the way I've fixed it up, you see.

MM: Where does the old version come from?

BT: Well, it's an old Scots-Irish tune there. It comes from over there... Most of them did...

MM: *Oh, come to think of it, somebody told me there was a - Durang was a dancer...I believe. And he composed this hornpipe to accompany his dancing.*

BT: It's possible, it's possible...

DG: I've heard it called "Durango's Hornpipe." Maybe after Colorado... Durango, New Mexico...

BT: Durango, well you can't ever tell... Like "Cripple Creek" or "Salt River". There's a Salt River...

DG: *Yeah, there's a Salt River...*

BT: ... "Bitter Creek."

MM: Where's Bitter Creek? Is that after a real landmark?

BT: It's real...

MM: Is that Texas?

BT: Ah, that's where I first learned it. I've played it all my life, I guess.

DG: You learned it at a place called Bitter Creek?

BT: No, no [laughs] But there is, I've crossed Bitter Creeks all over the country, there traveling around [laughter]...every time I cross one, I think of that old "Bitter Creek." "Forked Deer", I've been to Forked Deer, places with the name of Forked Deer. I imagine those old tunes came from towns, creeks, or locations, and things like that.

DG: On your County album, you have a tune called "Midnight on the Water."

BT: My daddy made that old tune. He made that song.

DG: So years from now, nobody will know, where that tune came from.

BT: Nobody will know where it come from. They'll think maybe it hatched from overseas or something. [laughter]

MM: What tunes, what tunes have you made up?

BT: No, I never made up a tune. I can sit down and just play one off for you, but I never, there's so many others that's already made up, that's so good, I was never foolish enough to make one... [laughter]

DG: There seem to be a lot more new fiddle tunes, now... Like Kenny Baker, at least, about, well, two of his albums are all new tunes, that he wrote.

BT: Yeah, he comes out with a bunch of them. He just sets down, and scraping across the fiddle, makes a tune out of it, you see. Old Kenny's good. I went out and stayed about a week with him a couple of years ago. He's a good fiddler.

[Pause...] Music in the background.

DG: "I Don't Love Nobody"... popular song it seems... How old, how far back does that tune go, do you know?

BT: That's an old tune ... I learned that tune when I was about 15 years old. Now that's altogether different than the way it, first come out. I can show you a version on that tune there that's got an A minor part in it. That's not anything like "I Don't Love Nobody." That's the name of the tune that they've given this, you see.

DG: There's another one that Bob Wills recorded, "I Don't Love Nobody" that's totally different from this one.

BT: It's altogether different. It's probably the same tune I'm talking about. I used to play with them boys, Bob and the boys down there. See, they was in Fort Worth, and I lived fourteen miles away from them. They used to call me up every once in a while and ask me if I'd come and sit in with them, and play a hoedown on the program. I knew Bob ever since he was eighteen years old.

DG: Is he one of the good fiddlers you think?

BT: Yeah, well, I'll tell you what. Actually Bob wasn't a hoedown fiddler. He wasn't much of a hoedown fiddler because he'd play say, more with popular stuff. Although he used to play some pretty

good old hoedowns, and stuff like that. But he started out playing mostly songs for show stuff, radio, stuff like that, you know.

DG. And then movies. He started making movies, too. [...pause] Well, I guess we've kept you here about an hour, I think. Thank you for helping us out.

BT: You're welcome, you're welcome.