

Byron Berline

Gracing the Strings

By Paul Jacobs

For more than thirty years, Byron Berline's graceful fiddle playing has been featured on dozens of recordings by artists as diverse as Bill Monroe, the Rolling Stones, and Henry Mancini. Born in Caldwell, Kansas, and raised in Oklahoma, Byron was influenced early on by his father, Lue Berline, a championship old time fiddler, to take up the fiddle and make a career in music. Along the way, Byron became a highly sought-after session player and a triple-threat instrumentalist (fiddle, guitar and mandolin).

After spending twenty-six years in California, Byron is now living in Guthrie, Oklahoma, operating Byron's Double Stop Music Shop and Music Hall, selling instruments and putting on shows: "It's working out better than I expected, to tell you the truth. I didn't really know what to expect, but it's just been a lot of fun." His new recording with the Byron Berline Band, Live at the Music Hall, is a mix of traditional fiddle tunes, bluegrass and swing: "We're kind of tickled with it," says Byron.

This interview was conducted by telephone in October, 1997. With folks coming into the fiddle shop, Byron kindly took an hour from his workday to answer my questions.

How old were you when you started playing?

Well, I learned my first tune, I remember, when I was about five. My dad was a fiddler, see, so...

Right, your father was a pretty famous old time fiddler...

Yeah, he won his share of contests and stuff. Lue Berline. I don't remember not playing; it was always around us. I was the youngest one of five kids, and none of them played fiddle; they played other instruments but not fiddle. And he always wanted one of us to play the fiddle, so I was his last chance!

You were elected.

Yeah.

Well, I think he made the right choice.

Oh, I've enjoyed it tremendously. It's a lot of fun.

So you started when you were five — did you keep up all through your youth and adolescence?

Oh, yeah, sure. My dad would take me to contests all around, mainly in Oklahoma, and he kept talking about these Texas fiddlers he remembered, like Major Franklin — he knew him. Of course he liked Howdy Forrester — we used to listen to [him on] the Grand Ol' Opry. He liked Arthur Smith's fiddle playing. But



In front of Byron's Double Stop Fiddle Shop and Music Hall in Guthrie, Oklahoma.

we finally got to go to a contest back in New Mexico when I was about sixteen years old. And a lot of the Texas fiddlers were there. We went to Hail Center, Texas, which is down by Plainview, Texas, and that's where I got to meet all the Texas type fiddlers — The Solomons, The Franklins, and Benny Thomasson, Eck Robertson. It was great to be able to hear those types of fiddlers when I was fifteen or sixteen years old, and that kind of changed my whole outlook. My dad played almost that style but didn't improvise as much. He was a little more straight-ahead fiddler. But then the only albums you could listen to back when I was growing up were Tommy Jackson square dance-type records. And Howdy Forrester had a couple of them out. So that's where I learned a lot of my tunes from. And as you travel around a little more, which I did, you just pick up stuff from other fiddlers. But they were all big influences, all those Texas fiddlers. Then of course bluegrass came along, and all of those fiddlers — Kenny Baker, Chubby Wise, all the Bill Monroe fiddlers.

When you got into bluegrass, coming from old time music, from what I understand you went out and played in Newport with your dad in 1965.

Yes. Both of us played fiddle. We had Jim Rooney and Bill Keith back us up on the main stage. We got to jamming with them, so they were nice enough to back us up. So we had pretty good help there. That was where I met Bill Monroe — at that festival — and that's when he asked me to join his band, which I did later, in 1967. I was with him for about seven months.

And then Uncle Sam asked you to join him. What was it like playing with Monroe for those seven months?

Oh, it was really good. Of course, every time we drove the bus, it would break down.

Oh, that's why they call it the "Bluegrass Breakdown."

Yeah. I don't care if we drove fifty miles, the thing would break

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down, something would go wrong with it. But I had a real good time. Bill was great to get along with. I'd have to ask him, "Bill, am I doing things okay?" And he'd say, "Yeah, you're doing fine."

You recorded three sides with him, right before you went off to the Army — "Virginia Darling," "Gold Rush," and "Sally Goodin'." Do you remember anything in particular about that session?

I remember the whole thing, really. It was quite an exciting moment for me to be able to do that. I remember we all stood in a semi-circle, each of us had our own mic, and we had three hours to do it in. They were very strict in Nashville, you know, they went by the clock, and they tried to get a song an hour, which they did. We wanted to do "Train 45." We had that ready to record and we ran out of time. Now you can just book the studio as long as you want, but that's the way they did it back in those days. A three-hour slot and that's it — you do all you can in three hours... But we just stood in a semi-circle, and it was interesting the way it came out. We didn't use any earphones or anything like that, we just stood up there and played.

How about the tune "Gold Rush"? I always thought you were responsible for that tune.

I helped with that. Bill and I both came up with that. I think he had the original idea of it. To me, it wasn't much of a tune, I didn't think at the time, because it wasn't really up-tempo — it wasn't slow by any means, but it wasn't real fast like "Roanoke" or "Rawhide," some of those instrumentals that he's more known for.

Yeah, I helped him do that. I didn't think anything about it at the time, as far as writing credit, it didn't even dawn on me.

I think that tune has gone on to be part of all kinds of bluegrass players' and jammers' repertoires. Are you ever surprised to go and hear that at a jam at a festival, everybody playing "Gold Rush"?

No, I'm not surprised. The reason it took off is because banjo players love it. Anybody likes it. It's a fairly simple tune, easy to learn. It's one of those that people just kind of grab onto.

Sometimes people even choreograph their body movements to the syncopation — do you notice that?

Oh, sure. That's when the wagon hit the rock...

After you left Bill Monroe, you went into the Army for a little while. Did you continue to play?

I was lucky enough to get to play for a colonel who liked country music. In fact, it was about the fifth week of basic training that they had a thing called "Family Day," and they wanted to get together a little band from our company, so they put me in charge of that. There weren't any musicians in that whole company that you could say were musicians. So I asked my company commander if I could get some people to come help me play, and he says, "Hey, you're running it, you do what you want." So I called up the Stone Mountain Boys out of Dallas — Alan Munde was playing banjo with them at the time, and they were guys I had jammed with a lot when I was in college. So they brought a fiddle over for me, this one Saturday morning, and we played for our company, and there was this colonel, Colonel Reed, and he loved country music. So he heard us play and he just flipped out about it, and came running over, saying, "Oh, gosh, you've got to play for the General, you got to do this, you got to do that." So he told the General, and I ended up playing for the Officer's Ball about the next week. I didn't get to use [the Stone Mountain Boys] — I just played by myself pretty much — I think there were some people from Special Services there. That's what I wanted to do, get into Special Services, and luckily it all worked out. They put me in Special Services, so I just stayed there, Fort Polk, Louisiana, for almost two years, which I was thankful to do, during that time.

Yes, indeed — that was a rough time to be in the Army. Going back a little ways, before you got with Monroe, you were able to record with the Dillard's.

That's right. I met them — it's always some significant day, it seems like, when things happen — I met them the day President Kennedy was killed. November 22, 1963. They came to the University of Oklahoma. It was on a Friday, and they were doing a thing called "Friday at Four," a folk music show, and I was on that show also. Right before they went on, somebody introduced me to them, and I talked to Doug mainly, the banjo player, and he said, "Well, when we get through, I'd like to hear you play." So I went out and watched their show, and it was real exciting — I'd never heard anything like it, really, up to that point. After they finished their show, I found them back in one of the rooms at the student

union, and we jammed for a couple of hours — just one fiddle tune after the other. They loved that kind of stuff, so then they asked me to record with them that next summer.

I've got the record right here in my hands, it's The Dillards with Byron Berline, Pickin' and Fiddlin' on Electra, and it's all fiddle tunes. Did they know all those tunes or did you have to teach them some of them?

I had to teach them some of them. Mainly they knew them.

So did you go out and tour with them after that?

I stayed with them for about four or five weeks out there when I went out to do that album, and toured around with them some. It was a lot of fun. It was a thrill for me to do that.

So after you got out of the Army...

Doug Dillard called me the day before I got out of the Army, and asked me to come out and record. I had intended to go back to Nashville. But I went out [to California]. I was out there four days and ended up doing other session work, movie scores and what have you, and they wanted me to move out there, too, so that's what I did.

And after you got out here, the session work really took off for you.

Yeah, well the Rolling Stones thing helped.

That's probably the first time I heard you play, on that album Let It Bleed in '69 — "Country Honk."

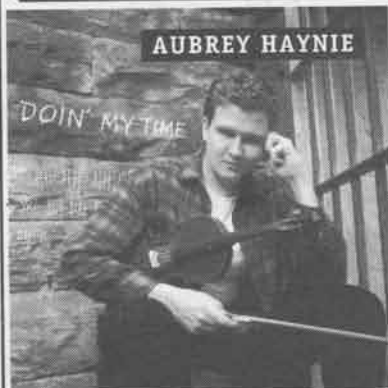
Gram Parsons suggested to them to get me to play on it, and I just barely knew him. This was in October of '69, about the same time. But anyway, I was back in Oklahoma here, getting ready to move out there on a permanent basis, and they called me up one evening and wanted me to come out. So they flew me out, picked me up, and we went up in the Hollywood Hills there — they had a house rented, and we stayed there for a few minutes, then we went down to the studio, Electra Studios, in L.A. I was in the studio for a couple of passes through, and they said, "Hey, we want you to come in, we want to talk to you," and I thought, oh, they don't like it, they're going to dump it. But I went in and they said, "We want you to stand outside in the street on the sidewalk and record it — we'll get a nice ambiance, we think," and I kind of giggled and said, "Well, whatever you want to do." So that's what we did. That's where they got the car horn.

How were they to work with?

Oh, great. People were just experimenting around with music, and mixing different instruments, you know, rock and roll with bluegrass instruments, traditional instruments.

Rock and roll was very young back then. It wasn't too far removed from Elvis. And bluegrass was very young back then, too — it wasn't very far removed from Lester and Earl and the Bluegrass Boys.

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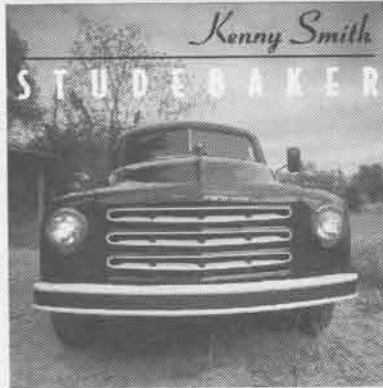
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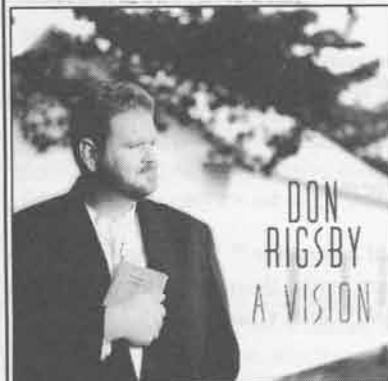


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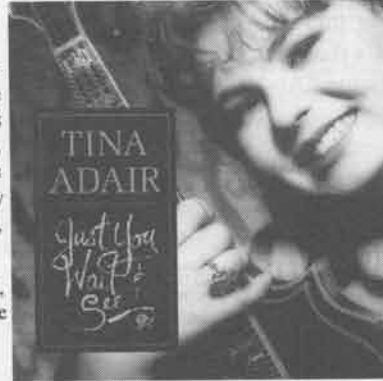


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That's right. Everybody was just trying different things. I think people still are, but that was the beginning of it. The Doors even used Jessie McReynolds right before that on a cut. They were all down at that session, by the way. The Doors came down, Bonnie Bramlet was there... There were a lot of people down there partying with them.

What was it like to go from being in the presence of guys like Eck Robertson, Benny Thomasson, folks like that, and playing with the Dillardards and Monroe, to playing with the rockers?

Well, it was a big change. The music is closely related, but you had to really study it in a way. Be able to improvise enough to get by with it. And naturally, playing with Monroe, I listened as much as I could to his past recordings, to see what those fiddlers did, how they approached it. You couldn't just get up there and start sawing away. You had to stay with the melody, and do what he wanted. He'd let you know if something was really off line. But for me he was easy to work with. Other people won't say that, but I had a good time with him. He just loved the old time tunes. He always featured me on the Grand Ol' Opry every time we got on there — he'd have a fiddle tune.

He always spoke highly of the Bluegrass Boys, too, and gave them room to play. What he would say, I heard, was that he liked to keep all the right things in bluegrass music.

Well, he had his way of playing it, and that was his prerogative — if he wanted it a certain way, then that's the way it was.

A couple of your early endeavors in L.A. were with Country Gazette and The Burrito Brothers...One of the tunes you did with them was one of your own tunes called the "Huckleberry Hornpipe." That's a real fine tune — do you still play that?

Oh, we sure do. In fact, our guitar player, Jim Fish, who works in our band, has copied Clarence White to a T. Not only his acoustic but his electric playing, too. So he knew all those songs when I arrived here in Oklahoma, which was a really nice thing to run into. So we play that all the time.

Do you have a regular practice routine that you go through, or do you pick it up and just play?

No, our band practices once a week, we try to every week, and work up new material and go over things. We just enjoy it, we make it a fun thing — I think that's the way practice ought to be. You should look forward to practicing. And if you use that word "practice," some kids don't like that word. I'm going to *play* now. That sounds better.

"Practice" has a bad connotation.

Yeah, it sounds like something your mom and dad forced you to do, or your teacher. And you should look at it as a fun thing. But it's still a learning experience.

What would you recommend for beginners to concentrate on?

Well, to be able to note true — that's where scales come in real handy. If you're going to hit an A note, and you put your first finger down on the B, make sure it's not a B flat or whatever. Try to get it as true as you can. That's the hardest thing about playing the fiddle. There are no frets, of course, so you have to get all those notes in there where they're real clear and real clean and true. That's not easy to do sometimes.

Do you have any suggestions for playing backup?

Try to complement whoever is taking the lead as much as you can, and, just like the word says, back them up. Whether that be with fills, or rhythmic things or whatever. A fiddle can be used as a good backup instrument, too, if you use it right — different little bow strokes, little things you can do with the bow, and then, of course, playing lines. Try not to play the melody as much, but like a third part or something. With all the different kinds of music, the way you approach it is a little bit different, I think. With bluegrass you may be able to get away with playing a little bit more... Sometimes it's better to just lay out and not do anything, rather than play too much.

When you were growing up in Oklahoma, was Bob Wills much of an influence on you?

Well, he was on my dad. I never got around that kind of swing fiddling that much at all, for some reason. My dad knew a lot of his songs, you know, "Maiden's Prayer," "Faded Love," "San Antonio Rose," all those things. But I never got around anybody that played swing much. We used to listen to him on the radio, of course.

You covered a couple of his tunes on Fiddle and a Song.

Yeah, "Faded Love," and I think we did "Roly Poly." I love to do it. We do western swing with this band, we do a lot of Bob Wills stuff. We're on radio, by the way, in Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri, every Saturday night, on KSDI out of Wichita, and we're on KBOO, which Bob Wills played on for twenty years, out of Tulsa.

Well, when our readers are driving through on their way to your fiddle shop, they can tune in...

Yeah, every Saturday night at nine o'clock. Also, we're on KTPS in Springfield, Missouri.

I remember once about twelve years ago when you were playing up at the Strawberry Festival, it was in '85, and Monroe was on the show. Do you remember the birthday present you gave him?

Oh, do I! All the fiddlers up there.

And Bill's response was, "What a surprise." And it seemed to me that he really dug that. He was really, thoroughly touched when you brought everybody up to play Sally Goodin' with him.

Oh, he was thrilled. That's a great memory.

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Do you have any plans to take your band out on the road?

Oh, yeah. We do almost weekly, or bi-weekly shows here at the music hall, and we've been traveling some. We're up to go anywhere...

Are you teaching?

Yeah, I just do the [custom] video thing pretty much. Anybody that comes in, I steer them over to the videos. John Hickman teaches banjo, and Jim Fish, our guitar player, teaches guitar. But I just mainly do it with videos, and it works out real well that way.

About His Instrument

Do you have a favorite fiddle that you use when you go out?

I'm playing a fiddle made by Dean Trammel now. He lived in Ducor, California, and he's since moved back to Muldrow, Oklahoma. He made this five-string fiddle for me. In fact, a lot of people in California are using his fiddles. He started making them probably seven or eight years ago. He was mostly a repairman before that. He's a fiddle player himself. He makes nice fiddles. I like it because it's so balanced, and I like the way it records. So I just play it. I've got a lot of fiddles that I could play, and they're all good — some are just better than others, I guess. It's all personal taste.

What would you look for?

Everybody's different in what they like in a fiddle. Most fiddlers like a darker, deeper sound, whereas classical players like a little brighter sound, that'll carry a little more. I can usually tell what a fiddle player likes, after listening to them play on about three or four fiddles. So it's easy for me to get them fiddles that fit them.

What about strings?

I usually use a Swedish steel string, Prim. I like those a lot. I use different strings on different fiddles, of course. If I have it set up classically, I'll use perlon, which is a real worldwide used string now, and they're good strings. I used to use Eudoxa (Pirastro), they're more expensive strings, but not too much anymore. Mainly I use Prim.

So it sounds like you're keeping pretty busy. When you were doing the column for Frets [Magazine, no longer publishing], was that helpful to your teaching, to analyze your own playing by writing about it?

Oh, definitely. If you have to write about something that you do, it makes you think about it a little more. It definitely helped. Then if you can't remember what you did you just go back and read what you said. [laughter] "It's in your book!" "Oh, that's right, I forgot that." ♪

[Byron's latest CD, *Live at the Music Hall*, is available from him for \$15 plus \$2 postage (address below). His next International Bluegrass Festival will be held in Guthrie, Oklahoma, October 1-3, 1998. For more information, contact Byron at 121 E. Oklahoma, Guthrie, OK 73044.]

Discography

Solo Albums: *Fiddle and a Song*, 1995, Sugar Hill 3838
Jumpin' the Strings, 1991, Sugar Hill 3787
Double Trouble (with John Hickman), 1986, Sugar Hill 3750
Outrageous, 1981, Flying Fish
Dad's Favorites, 1979, Rounder 0100
Pickin' and Fiddlin' (with the Dillard's), 1964, Elektra

Group Albums:

Byron Berline Band, *Live at the Music Hall*, 1997, DSM 001
California, *California Traveler*, 1992, Sugar Hill 3803
BCH, *Now They Are Four*, 1991, Sugar Hill 3773
BCH, *B.C.H.*, 1986, Sugar Hill 3755A
BCH, *Night Run*, 1984, Sugar Hill 3739
BCH, *Berline, Crary, Hickman*, 1981, Sugar Hill 3720
L.A. Fiddle Band, *B. Berline & L.A. Fiddle Band*, 1980, Sugar Hill 3716
Sundance, *Live at McCabe's*, 1979, Takoma 7061
Sundance, *Byron Berline & Sundance*, 1977, MCA
Country Gazette, *Live at McCabe's*, 1974
Country Gazette, *Don't Give Up Your Day Job*, 1973, UA
Country Gazette, *Traitor in Our Midst*, 1972, UA

[Paul Jacobs plays mandolin, guitar, and fiddle, and is a founding member of the bands *Earthquake Country*, *The Tarnation Band*, and *The Love Slaves*. He hosts weekly bluegrass and blues radio shows on KKUP FM 91.5, Cupertino, California.]

Jumpin' the Strings

By Byron Berline. Transcribed by Jack Tuttle as played by Byron Berline on his *Jumpin' the Strings* CD (Sugar Hill 3787).
(Also transcribed in Mel Bay's *Jumpin' the Strings* — transcriptions of all twenty-two of Byron's tunes from the album.)

The musical score is written on a single treble clef staff in the key of D major (indicated by two sharps: F# and C#). The piece is in 2/4 time. The score is divided into eight systems, each starting with a measure number (1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29). Chord diagrams are placed above the staff at the beginning of each system: A (measures 1-4), E (measures 5-8), A (measures 9-12), E (measures 13-16), D (measures 17-20), A (measures 21-24), D (measures 25-28), and E (measures 29-32). The notation includes various rhythmic patterns such as eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together, and rests. Fingering numbers (1-4) are placed below the notes to indicate fingerings. Some notes have a 'V' above them, likely indicating a vibrato or a specific bowing technique. The score concludes with a final chord diagram of E in measure 32.