

Roy Crawford:

Keeping Traditions Alive and Well in Alabama

By L. Scott Miller



Roy Crawford (back) and fiddle students, 2008

On a sunny March afternoon musicians and onlookers gather in the fellowship hall of the Rock Creek Methodist Church located in rural north Alabama. Home-cooked entrées, vegetables, and desserts line serving tables, and the sounds of laughter and stories from young and old fill the room. One by one musicians begin tuning guitars, mandolins, and fiddles. In the middle of the group sits a seventy-three year old gentleman, tall in stature and witty in character, who brings the group to order. “Liza Jane,” he calls, and the group fills the room with the sounds of southern style fiddling the leader has cultivated over the last fifty-five years. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and friends snap pictures and turn on video cameras to capture the scene, which, once common for traditional music, has become uncommon in today’s urban culture. The leader and teacher of this group is Alabama fiddle legend Roy Crawford.

Roy Crawford’s fame as an award-winning fiddler has been legendary in the South. One room of his home boasts the many awards and accolades he has received over the years, and countless others are stored away in boxes. Roy has been written and spoken about over the years as a champion fiddler, but this description falls far short of describing him as a consummate musician. He moves easily from the contest style fiddling for which he is known, to western swing, pop standards, bluegrass, and country. With seemingly little effort, he plays twin fiddle to slow and lyrical melodies as well as fast and notey tunes which seem impossible to boast a harmony. He is a tunesmith and songwriter, singer, entertainer, and teacher. His teaching has included such notables as champion

fiddler Sharon (Winters) Bounds, Nashville session musician Wanda Vick, the late Wendy Holcomb of Hee Haw fame, and his own son, Charles, who plays electric guitar and fiddle for the country group Heartland. Today at his north Alabama home, Roy teaches aspiring fiddlers that range in age from seven to sixty-two. Periodic gatherings at homes and meeting halls give students an opportunity to play and encourage one another as they become part of the fiddling tradition Roy has known since he was a young boy.

Roy Crawford was raised on a farm in the hills of east Alabama, thirty miles east of Talladega in the small community of Lineville. His first exposure to fiddling came from his grandfather, John Floyd Yancy, who played for local square dances and at local fiddle conventions. Roy has many fond memories of his grandpa, who took him to the creeks to catch turtles and into the woods to gather roots and herbs. “My grandpa was an herb healer,” recalls Roy. “He so badly wanted to pass on his knowledge of medicinal herbs and roots to his family but no one really showed interest. He tried to teach me but I was such a little feller I would forget it all by the time we got back to the house.” One thing that did remain with Roy, though, was his grandfather’s love of fiddling. “He played in the old time way using open tunings. He stuck mostly to the melody but played very rhythmically which made dancing easy. He played old tunes like “Hop Light Ladies” and “Jack of Diamonds.”

At the age of six, Roy’s first instrument was the guitar. “In my family being able to play G, C, and D on the guitar was a given.”

Later he picked up the mandolin because his older brother Dick had assumed the position of the family's fiddler. Roy said, "I remember when I was around ten years old a man came to our home looking for someone to play music at a house party. My older brother, who usually played guitar, wasn't around so Dick reluctantly took me. I tagged along with guitar in hand, bib overalls and barefoot. It was kind of like a coming out for me. I'll never forget that Dick and I played "Wednesday Night Waltz" and it was so beautiful that those people just wept. My brother Dick really inspired me as a fiddler. His playing in those early days was the most creative I've heard in all my days as a musician."

After brother Dick left home, Roy began playing the fiddle. "We needed a fiddler so I began messing around with it. I really enjoyed the fiddle and worked hard at it." Roy's rapid progress as a nineteen year old fiddler soon paid off as he was invited to play for local dances and eventually began playing professionally full time. "In the days before TV and Elvis it was easy to draw large crowds. We would play at a local radio station, announce a live performance and people would turn out in large numbers. It was the only available entertainment." When asked why he left music full time, he says, "I was asked by Bill Monroe's fiddler if I would like to audition for the fiddle job as a "Bluegrass Boy." I inquired about the pay and found it paid \$90.00 a week plus room and board. I told him I couldn't raise my young family on that kind of money (the reason the present fiddler was leaving) and turned down the opportunity. I became disenchanted with the music business and the difficulty of being a road musician and raising a family." Shortly after, Roy was offered a position with a company as an entry level data processor. The job included training and opportunity for career advancement. This began the successful professional career that Roy worked at until his retirement. However,

unlike many great fiddlers who quit playing when they pursue other vocational endeavors, Roy continued to play semi-professionally. In the early 1970s he began competing in fiddle contests and honed his skills to become an award-winning fiddler.

Years of fiddling have provided Roy with many friends and memorable experiences. When asked about his fondest memory he says, "Without a doubt, representing southeastern traditional music at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. during the nation's Bicentennial celebration. I was invited along with fiddlers J.T Perkins of Alabama, Jack Weeks of Georgia, and Frazier Moss of Tennessee. Claudie Holt and Algie Surratt, both from Alabama, were our guitar players. We were all good friends, and we found such a warm reception to our music. During the evenings we would walk around the dorms that housed many national as well as international acts and jam. J.T. and I got in a session with a group of traditional French musicians. We couldn't understand each other except for nods and gestures, but we traded tunes and played together. The music made up for the verbal communication barrier. J.T. and I learned the tune 'Waltz of the Leaves' from those French fiddlers." During that trip Roy and Tennessee fiddle legend Frazier Moss were video recorded in an impromptu session to be archived in the Smithsonian for future generations.

Roy speaks fondly of his friend and fellow fiddler J.T. Perkins of Arab, Alabama. "J.T. was my good friend and although we competed against each other in contests, it never had a negative effect on our relationship. He was such an innovative fiddler and improvised with such ease. He told me once, 'Crawford, when you fiddle yourself out on a limb sometimes that'll be your best fiddlin'. But sometimes the limb breaks,' and he would laugh. We recorded an album in the 1980s together called *Flattops and*

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Rebe Gosdin and The Sunny Valley Boys at WBAM in Montgomery, AL, 1954-1955 (left to right): Vance Truell, guitar and banjo; Rebe Gosdin, mandolin; Chuck Franklin, guitar; Roy Crawford, fiddle. Roy is about twenty here.

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Peck Rowell and the Covered Wagon Boys (1953) (left to right): Tater Jinks, steel guitar; Gerald Driver, rhythm guitar and vocals; Larry ?, drums; Roy Crawford, fiddle and vocals; Peck Rowell, lead guitar

Fiddles along with Claudie Holt and Algie Surratt both playing guitar. We got together the night before the session to work things out, but nothing clicked. It was hard for J.T. to play something the same way twice because he was such a free-spirited improviser. But the next day in the studio everything came together. We recorded the whole album live with no overdubs except for triple fiddle parts we added later. I had played with J.T. so much that I could pretty much play twin to him on the spot because I intuitively knew where he was going.” The album *Flattops and Fiddles* went on to be a standard collector’s item for young fiddlers as they tried to imitate and copy the two Alabama fiddle heroes — J.T. Perkins and Roy Crawford.

Roy says the greatest influence on his style and fiddling was the late Howdy Forrester. “Howdy was such a master. His playing was clean, clear, and smooth and his timing was impeccable. I have tried to make those qualities part of my playing.” Roy’s tone, pitch, and double stops have made his waltzes the featured part of his playing. This is affirmed in his waltz “Beautiful Dreamer” being included on the recording of *Grand Master Fiddlers* compiled by Grand Master’s Fiddle Championship founder Doc Harris. Roy attributes this facet of his playing to his love for waltzes and years of playing the mandolin. “The mandolin helped me grasp chord positions and harmony which automatically transferred to the fiddle.”

These days Roy is still active in competitive fiddling, fronts his bluegrass band, “Roy Crawford and Cullman County Bluegrass,” and performs in a duo called the “Honeysuckle Fiddle Show.” His latest CD, *Front Porch Fiddlin’*, has received rave reviews, and he is making preparation for a new fiddle recording. The new project will include some of his originals and not often heard tunes which have long been a part of his repertoire

And two days each week you will see this master fiddler sitting patiently amidst squeaks and squawks teaching a new generation of fiddlers — and so, traditional music lives on.

You can learn more, hear clips of Roy’s playing, and order “Front Porch Picken” at www.CDBaby.com. You can also see video of his playing on youtube by searching “honeysuckle fiddle show.”

[L. Scott Miller is a multi-instrumentalist, educator, and writer who has worked in both commercial and traditional music. At present he resides in north Alabama with his wife and three budding fiddlers. He can be heard playing with Roy Crawford as part of the “Honeysuckle Fiddle Show.”]

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Roy's Hornpipe

©2006 Roy Crawford Music. Before a performance you'll hear Roy Crawford playing a tune that he initially wrote as an exercise or étude. He continued to add parts until the tune he calls "Roy's Hornpipe" was born. Roy says, "It moves all over the fiddle and gives your bowing a workout. I've taught it to students over the years to help develop their bowing and movement across the fingerboard. The section in 2nd position also helps work on pitch and shift movements."

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