

## **Best Practices for Old Time String Band Contests Final Report on AFS Professional Development Project**

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American Folklore Society Professional Development funds enabled me to attend the 25<sup>th</sup> Appalachian String Band Festival (aka “Clifftop”) held July 30 – Aug. 4, 2014 at Camp Washington Carver, West Virginia. One of the biggest festivals to focus strictly on Appalachian old-time music (i.e. no bluegrass, which is a post-World War II style), Clifftop features a strong contest component as well as workshops, concerts, dances and jam sessions. Although the festival officially begins on Wednesday, hundreds of musicians begin gathering and camping at the site starting the previous Friday; I attended from July 26 to Aug. 4, 2014. I served as one of three judges of both the traditional string band and fiddle contests, met for discussion with festival founder and director Bobby Taylor, and participated in many informal music sessions.

The American fiddle contest tradition, out of which the string band contests have sprung, was first documented in 1736. During the second half of the twentieth century, a highly formalized style of American fiddling, based on post-World War II styles including bluegrass and swing, emerged out of the fiddle contest circuit. This genre of fiddling is now known as “contest style.” Over time, national and regional fiddle associations have adapted standardized contest criteria and rules, although there are many fiddle contests that choose to operate outside of these codified and restrictive standards.

At some point during the twentieth century (probably post-WWII), fiddle contests expanded to include different categories, including band contests as well as contests for other musical instruments, dance and song. During the 1950s, bluegrass and old-time music became recognized as two distinct genres (mainly distinguished by the banjo style), so most existing band contests developed two separate divisions, one for bluegrass bands and the other for old-time bands. This still holds true for many contests in the South, including two of the biggest: Galax and Mt. Airy. Over the past twenty-five years, old-time music has experienced a surge in popularity, leading to the establishment of festivals and contests that are specifically for old-time, not bluegrass, music. The biggest one of these is Clifftop, founded in 1990 by Bobby Taylor, Will Carter and George Jordan, under the auspices of the West Virginia Division of Culture and History in collaboration with Camp Washington-Carver State Park (the festival site).

There are at least fifteen other old-time string band contests, most of which take place in the south. The Berkeley Old Time Music Convention’s string band contest differs from most others in that it is located in on the west coast and takes place in an urban setting; it is small in scale, with only 20 bands competing, as opposed to Clifftop which generally has between 30 and 50 groups competing.

Twenty-first century old-time string band contests help to preserve and perpetuate the non-professional back-porch music that has been an expression of Appalachian mountain cultural life for many generations. Prestige (“bragging rights”) rather than monetary gain is the motivating factor in attracting competing bands. With the increasing professionalization of every kind of music, string band contests provide a relatively small-scale, horizontal, face-to-face interaction that mirrors the kinds of musical interactions that were commonplace in an earlier era. This is social music, not “art” music, and festivals with an old-time string band component such as Clifftop, Galax or BOTMC foster the social connections inherent in this art form, which are central to the music itself.

Some old-time string band contests, generally in the south, deliberately focus on one regional (or even local) style of playing; others (particularly outside of the south) are open to a wider variety of regional styles. Both approaches are valuable. The local orientation is not stated explicitly; it emerges out of contest criteria and the selection of the judges. Locally-oriented band contests serve as a means of assigning value and recognition to the community’s own tradition-bearers, since the home-town bands (who are of course well known to the judges, organizers and audience) nearly always win all the prizes. In addition to attracting old-time musicians from the region, the more established of these locally-oriented contests also draw from a national (and sometimes international) pool of old-time musicians, who know they are not going to win but enter the contest anyway in a spirit of support and solidarity. These visiting musicians are there not so much to enter the contest as to make connections with and learn from the local musicians.

As mentioned, many string band contests include two categories: Old-Time and Bluegrass. Other string band contests have opted for an even more all-embracing approach. Clifftop has two contest categories: Traditional Band and Neo-Traditional Band. The distinction is one of omission. The Traditional band contest is clearly the centerpiece of the festival; the final round takes place on Saturday night. Clifftop’s Trad Band contest requires that bands perform traditional Appalachian repertoire in a traditional style on instruments normally associated with traditional Appalachian music. These purist restrictions encourage the pursuit of this non-commercial regional musical style and foster the handing down of the music between older generation tradition-bearers and younger musicians, some of whom may come from urban backgrounds.

In order to provide a performance platform for some of the other music that takes place in the campground, Clifftop originally created a Non-Traditional category which was renamed Neo-Traditional about ten years ago. Everything that doesn’t fit into Trad goes into the Neo-Trad contest. Thus, Clifftop’s Neo-Trad contest includes: 1) non-traditional music played on instruments normally associated with old-time music, or 2) traditional repertoire played in a non-traditional style, or 3) traditional repertoire played in a traditional style that is not Appalachian old-time music. An example of the first would be a song by the Beatles played in old-time style with fiddle, banjo and guitar; an example of the second would be an old-time tune like

“Sally Ann” played in reggae style; an example of the third would be a Cajun band playing “Lake Charles Twostep” or a bluegrass band performing “The Old Home Place”.

Best practices, informed by my conversations with Bobby Taylor and other members of the old-time music community, and by my own experiences as a judge at Clifftop and as a founder and director of the BOTMC would be:

1. To create a welcoming atmosphere for old-time musicians, along with their friends and family. This might include:
  - Keeping the admission and entry price affordable
  - Gathering and responding to feedback from participants
  - Encouraging the participation of the most highly respected old-time musicians, by invitation if appropriate
  - Keeping the physical site as comfortable and safe as possible
  - Creating activities suitable for children
  
2. To promote, present and perpetuate old-time string band music and to foster a standard of excellence in old-time string bands; to recognize the curatorial function of the old-time string band contest. This might include:
  - Including criteria that are deliberately vague and subjective, such as “feeling and soul”
  - Encouraging the inclusion of singing as part of the string band performance
  - Briefing the judges, reminding them to consider “ownership” of the stage as the ultimate criteria for excellence
  - Selecting judges who are respected within the old-time community
  
3. To honor “back porch” and non-professional musicians and their continuing legacy in old-time music, particularly those from the older generation. This might include:
  - Outreach to older generation tradition-bearers, creating a dedicated jamming, workshop, or performance context within which they can interact with younger players, perhaps partnering them with younger players for this purpose
  - Encouraging the creation of “campground” bands (i.e. groups that form spontaneously out of jam sessions and then enter the string band contest); creating judging criteria as stated above will help with this.
  
4. To draw a national and international pool of old-time musicians and bands. This might include:
  - Using word of mouth, including social media, as a major marketing tool
  - Creating a non-serious, fun atmosphere, conducive to social music making rather than emphasizing the competitive aspect of the contest

- Emphasizing “bragging rights” as the major prize, in addition to a monetary award. The monetary award can serve a positive function by drawing musicians of stature to the contest, but the cash prizes for old-time string band contests are not enough to cover a band’s travel from outside the region.

5. To consider whether to emphasize the “home region” in a string band contest, rather than opening it up to a variety of regional styles. This might include:

- Choosing judges from the local community vs. drawing from the national old-time music community
- Choosing judges who are steeped in their own local musical tradition vs. choosing judges who are familiar with more than one regional string band tradition
- Creating explicit judging criteria that give more weight to local/regional tunes or songs vs. keeping judging criteria as broad as possible
- Requiring a specific instrumentation (i.e. the inclusion of a fiddle and/or banjo) vs. requiring that instrumentation be that normally associated with an old-time band (i.e. non-specific)