



Young Fiddler's Forum
Quarterly Newsletter of the
Young Fiddler's Association of Minnesota
December, 2005

**Focus on Fiddling:
Old-time Cross-tuning styles
by Rachel Nelson**

The January 21 YFA workshop will feature an in-depth look at cross-tuning your fiddle to play old-time tunes. Why do I love cross tuning so much? Because it's—well, it's magical.

The first amazing thing that happens when you tune your instrument in a chord is that the tone quality of your fiddle changes. For example, in Yew Piney Mountain, which I play by turning my E string down to D and my A string down to G, I use a chord of GDGD, from low string to high string. D is a harmonic on the G string, and G is a harmonic on the D string, which means that the pitches are very close relatives. So close that when I play my high D string (the old E string) in this tuning, and then stop that string, I find the note is still ringing on—because the other strings are singing it.

This means that the whole fiddle is more resonant and ringing when you play Yew Piney Mountain in GDGD. Other old-time fiddlers often play this tune in AEAE, tuning the bottom two strings up. Either way, all the strings sing in this tune, even though there are very few double stops in it. This gives us that sound some have called a “high lonesome sound.”

Of course, when you DO try double stops in this tuning, as I do on Cripple Creek, it's loads of fun. And easy—because you can “drone” on one string while fingering the next door string, and it sounds great. The fingering is easier for that unison double-noting so prominent in old-time music, too, because the third finger on the D string is unison with the old A string. Yea! no fourth finger required!

A fun thing to try in this tuning is to set the G & D open strings ringing with an accented double stop, and then go to the top two strings to finger the melody. I do this in the B part of Cripple Creek, which I learned by listening to a recording of Hobart Smith. “Cool!” I thought. “This way, one fiddle

sounds like an entire band!” And it's true—this style grew out of those early times in 17th and 18th century mountain fiddling when one or two fiddles often had to be the whole band, because that's all they had.

This meant that those fiddlers had to be the rhythm section, too, and so they developed very cool ways to keep the pulse going even as they were playing the melody. That means they thought of their bows as rhythm instruments. The bowings in these tunes can be subtle and complex. What sounds like a shuffle bow pattern is often something else.

So in January's workshop, we'll look at bowing techniques like the push bow, the fast single note in the middle of slurs, and rocking onto double stops to kick the beat and keep things rocking.

We might even step the pulse while we're learning these bowing patterns. The goal is to get the rhythms of the bowings into your whole body.

And then there is the Shaggy Dog tune—in an even cooler tuning, GDGB. That means the former E string is now very low, and we get a cool effect by playing a unison double stop with the second finger on the old A string, and the old E string open. That's the place where traditional fiddle players often sing “OOO!” I've always thought this sounded like a dog howling. If you want to know more, come howl with us . . .

**Profile of a Young Fiddler:
Interview with Cody Sommer**

(YFA Newsletter: I know that your family has designed the YFA website. Did you have a role in choosing the YFA logo?)

“I designed it. What I was trying to think of was something kids in that age group would think of as fun—a cubic fiddler.”

(So for you, fun is part of YFA?) “I've been having fun—definitely. We've had a good turnout, more than I expected. I hope we have a good turnout for the January cross-tuning workshop as well.”

(The traditional method of learning fiddle tunes has been to learn by ear. These days, lots of young fiddlers can read music. What is your preferred method for learning fiddle tunes—with music or by ear?) “I especially like the teaching to be by ear. I think it's nice to have the music, in case you forget the tune. But it's definitely in your brain better if you memorize it. The listening does do that [as in listening to the YFA CD], but I really like the teaching to be by ear as well.”

(Do you play classical style violin too?)
“Yes, I do.”

(Is that how you started out on the instrument?)

"I began for 2-3 months with a classical teacher, but soon I went to Christine [Whyatt] and started learning tunes like Boil Em' Cabbage Down. It was just in the last couple of years that we've done more classical again."

(How do you like to learn classical tunes?)

"Usually I do read those as well, because they tend to be more complex tunes, although I do listen a lot and try to memorize them right away. You usually hear the tune better if you have it memorized."

(Does memorization make the playing more pleasurable for you?)

"Yes—you can always play the tune, even if you don't have the music with you."

(What are your favorite fiddle tunes and styles?)

"I like them all, except in different ways. The French-Canadian style I really like because it has the foot-stomping, and a very interesting style of bowing. For example, you do a really quick light up bow, and then a down bow. It took me a little while to master that French-Canadian bow stroke."

"I like the Irish a lot, because it's really fast. I like fast tunes. Irish is also very melodic, which is why I like the Swedish as well—it's got a melodic feel to it. I really like all the music. Whatever I try to play, I really like."

(What is your favorite fiddle tune?)

"Usually my favorite fiddle tune is the one I just learned."

(Besides YFA, have you had much experience playing fiddle with other musicians?) "I play in Christine Whyatt's Friday Fiddle Club, which has all fiddles plus Nelson Whyatt on piano or accordion."

"I also play with violas and cellos in my school orchestra: Trinity at River Ridge, which is a private school in Bloomington. *(You're lucky that your school has a string program—those are becoming more rare.)* "Yes, and I enjoy that as well."

(Is part of what you enjoy there hearing the whole orchestra when you play in it?) "Yes, I play second violin, and so I get to play some of the harmonies as well as melody."

(Do you ever play harmony in fiddle tunes?)

"Sometimes when I play with my brother Kent, he likes messing around with harmonies by ear. I also play a lot with him, at Christmas, and at our church."

(What are your hopes & dreams for YFA?) "That it will be able to keep going for the next several years, so that I can keep enjoying it!"

(Thanks for talking with us today, Cody!)

Upcoming Local Events of Interest

2006 Grass Seeds Academy, MBOTMA Winter Weekend, Friday-Sunday, March 3-5, 2006

Following a smashing debut last March, the Minnesota Bluegrass and Old-Time Music Association is proud to announce the second Grass Seeds Academy for young pickers and singers ages 8-18. The 2006 Grass Seeds Academy will be held in conjunction with MBOTMA's annual Winter Weekend at Radisson Hotel and Conference Center in Plymouth (I-494 and Hwy 55).

The 2005 Grass Seeds Academy found 50 young players studying fiddle, banjo, guitar, bass, and mandolin with members of the Monroe Crossing bluegrass band. Participants also enjoyed workshops on singing and band ensemble work. On Sunday, all Grass Seeds players performed in bands onstage at the weekend, to rave reviews. "This is the best thing we've heard here all weekend!" many listeners told us.

In January, MBOTMA will announce the band that will be teaching at this year's Grass Seeds Academy. For more information, you can visit MBOTMA's website at www.minnesotabluegrass.org or email grassseeds@minnesotabluegrass.org

Music Around Town

Featured winter venue: Dulono's Pizza, 607 W. Lake St, Minneapolis. Dulono's serves bluegrass and acoustic music from 8 pm to midnight with no cover charge, and they serve a full menu of food as well. Upcoming bands performing at Dulono's:

Jan 5-6	Hello Stranger (bluegrass)
Jan 13-14	The Blue Drifters (bluegrass)
Jan 20	Tangled Roots (bluegrass)
Jan 21	Singer songwriters Mary Henderson and Geoff Shannon
Feb 3-4	The Middle Spunk Creek Boys (bluegrass)
Feb 10-11	Switched At Birth (bluegrass)
Feb 18	The Chris Silver Band (Jam Band)
Feb 24	Tangled Roots (bluegrass)
Feb 25	Hello Stranger (bluegrass)
Mar 10-11	Cousin Dad (eclectic string band)
Mar 17-18	The Ditchlilies (classic country and old time)
Mar 25	The Chris Silver Band (bluegrass)
Mar 31-Apr 1	The Middle Spunk Creek Boys (bluegrass)

And for a complete listing of acoustic music concerts, jams, and radio shows, visit Jim Whitney's wonderful Twin Cities Acoustic Music Calendar at <http://jimwhitney.com/tcamc>

To the Editor

Each YFA newsletter will feature letters—from you! We want to hear your ideas and thoughts—on fiddling, on jamming, and on what you like or want in workshops. Share your thoughts with the entire YFA community right here, in the Young Fiddler's Forum.

Write to us at youngfiddlers@yahoo.com
or **Young Fiddlers, 2161 County Road B W,
Roseville, MN 55113.**

YFA News

Upcoming YFA Workshops:

Saturdays, 10 am-1 pm (\$45; \$40 for members)

Jan. 21 - Cross-tuning & Rags Workshop with Rachel Nelson

Discover the magic of tuning your fiddle in chords, and learn bowing techniques to bring Appalachian tunes like Cripple Creek and Shaggy Dog to life. Experiment with playing your own 2-bar break in Pig Ankle Rag. Learn the way bowing can define the rhythm of rags and swing tunes.

Mar. 25 - Klezmer Workshop with Judith Eisner

Upcoming YFA Jams:

Saturdays, 10 am-Noon (\$5, free to members)

Feb. 18

Apr. 29

May 20

Workshops and jams are held at Tapestry Folkdance Center, 3748 Minnehaha Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN. Gatherings include a break with refreshments. Come meet other young fiddlers in the area!

YFA Contact & Membership Info

YFA Individual Memberships are \$40/year, and family memberships are \$60/year. Membership includes a CD/Tune Book with featured workshop and jam tunes, and T-shirt(s).

The YFA 2005-6 CD/Tune Book can also be purchased separately for \$25, and YFA T-shirts are \$15 each.

To join YFA, register for workshops, or find out more about us, visit our website at www.youngfiddlers.com

For more information, contact: youngfiddlers@yahoo.com

**Young Fiddlers
2161 County Road B W
Roseville, MN 55113**



Who Are We?

Young Fiddlers Association of Minnesota

Providing Workshops & jam sessions
for fiddlers ages 8-18

YFA provides a monthly gathering for young fiddlers from October-May each year, excluding December.

Three of these monthly gatherings are workshops taught by area teachers on specific fiddle styles. Jam sessions on alternate months allow young fiddlers to get acquainted, play together, and make those connections that may lead to playing partners or bands.

We seek to build a community of young fiddlers who can support each other and share their love of music.

YFA's website also has an information section listing area teachers who can provide mentoring/instruction on various fiddle styles.

