

Tyler Childers- Long Violent History

Introduction: The Pickin' Crew
By Dom Flemons, "The American Songster"

My first introduction to Kentucky roots music came from the Smithsonian Folkways recordings of folklorists like John Cohen, Mike Seeger and Art Rosenbaum. During my time in college, the seminal 7-CD box set *Kentucky Mountain Music* was released on *Yazoo Records* and I was able to get a copy from my public library. This eventually led me to learn more about the musical styles of Roscoe Holcomb, Pete Steele, Burnett and Rutherford, Buell Kazee and a host of other early Kentucky songsters. I have always found Kentucky music to be intriguing because I found so many of the melodies to be what are known in old-time circles as "crooked" tunes, meaning that they add and subtract beats from standard musical notation. While this is a problem on staff paper, when playing old-time music for square dancing, this aesthetic actually enhances the musical experience for the dancers and the players. One of the most amazing aspects of learning traditional southern string band music is that in the most ideal situation it is not written down, it is played until it is correct. Like a massive mountainous landscape carved over generations by a strong and consistent river current, string band music isn't particularly a style that is discussed in terms of 'right' and 'wrong'. Once the fiddler sets the melody into place, the banjo finds a counterpoint and then the guitar picks out the mid-range bass notes or just strums the rhythm. This leaves a lot of room for a musician to find their place in the song so that their own style can develop naturally without any outside influences. In the same way that singers from a church background gain a strong knowledge of tone, pitch, and rhythm from singing in choirs, the musician who learns their instrument in a rich string band tradition can advance to a competent and even expert level in a relatively short period of time.

By the early 20th century, large events around the equestrian trade such as the Kentucky Derby featured black string bands, jug bands and jazz musicians playing in the stands. This interchange between the musical influences of the north, south, east and west of Kentucky brought on a rich influx that influenced its fiddle music tradition. Not only did players have access to the long standing Indigenous, African, and European-American fiddle traditions, access to the Mississippi River brought a new wave of popular music coming from New Orleans, Mississippi, Memphis, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Chicago, St. Louis, Minneapolis and Iowa. The ragtime, jazz, and blues melded together with the existing string band music to become a new type of American music, both rooted in the past and forged by the present.

For this epic recording session in the mountains of eastern Kentucky, Tyler Childers and his bandmate Jesse Wells meticulously curated a modern string band known as "The Pickin' Crew". This group of stellar Americana artists included myself, 5-string Kentucky banjo specialist John Haywood, mandolinist Andrew Marlin, guitarist Josh Oliver, upright bassist John R. Miller, fiddler Chloe Edmonstone and cellist Cecelia Wright. Although Tyler has been playing the fiddle for under a year, his style and technique as learned under the tutelage of Jesse Wells proves that Kentucky string band music is in his blood. The tunes presented in this album *Long Violent History* showcase the variety of fiddle styles that are profoundly represented in the American music lexicon.

Double fiddles can give even the scrappiest of string bands a sound of sophistication that is in line with a classical chamber orchestra. Whether the two fiddlers are of the same skill set is irrelevant, if locked into a strong harmony or unison style, two fiddlers can make some powerful music. Even a smooth fiddler and a scratchy fiddler playing off each other creates a texture that is so pleasing to many fans of old-time music. When one begins to explore the possibilities of a bigger string band sound beyond the standard

fiddle/banjo/guitar set up, one can explore it simply by adding other instruments of the traditional string orchestra family. A few examples include the Italian-derived mandolin which in the string band setting serves to punctuate the melodic leads, drive the fiddle harder and play expressive counterpoint parts like a New Orleans clarinetist in a jazz band. While not as common in the string band, the cello, famously known as the 'church house bass' in many traditional circles, provides a richness in tone that allows for yet another means to drive the tune. The upright bass, though a later addition to the string band sound compared to the other instruments, holds together the bottom end, and gives a bounce that keeps the dancers and the band all in one place.

In Kentucky, the stone mason bourbon “jug” has for years served a dual function as being both a vessel for the transportation of spirits and a homegrown musical instrument capable of mimicking the sounds of the brass band: the tuba, the trombone and the trumpet. The rhythm bones, originally made from animal rib bones, add a percussive urgency to the music when locked into the fiddle and banjo’s rhythm. The esoteric quills, also known as the panpipes, are known throughout the world but have been championed by only a few modern practitioners in its American form. Its pentatonic scale adds a high-pitched lilt to any tune its sound touches. The German Mouth Organ, also known as the French Harp and the harmonica, played in natural or first position, can easily slide between melody and rhythm providing both melodic reinforcement and beautiful blue notes that create rich textures around the fiddle’s melody. Finally, as a special treat I brought my good friend Big Head Joe, the Giant Six String Banjo to the recording session. This one of a kind handmade instrument is an oversized Guitar-Banjo made by an African American luthier named Robert H. McGinnis who built the instrument to be a part of the Clef Club Orchestra led by pioneer ragtime composer James Reese Europe. I had a feeling that Big Head Joe's throaty tone would sound great in the context of a bigger string band and it proved to be so much so that you can hear him picking out the first notes of the album.

The century old songs presented on this record represent a time capsule and a musical artifact. Tyler’s tintype photograph on the cover transcends the modern era and harkens back to the birth of American Popular music of the 1920’s when songsters and Tin Pan Alley songwriters created hits for Broadway. His presentation of Kentucky music and his debut as a fiddler are a reminder that roots music is still a thriving community. Listen to the music, meditate with it, flow along with the melodies, and let the rhythm seep into your mind. These songs are meant to last another hundred years, yet it is supposed to tell a new story about the struggles that lie within our generation. Tyler Childers, placing his fiddle on the wall chose to premiere only one original song where he sings: *Long Violent History*, a final powerful and poignant statement. Backed by the Pickin’ Crew, the nine tracks invite us into Tyler’s world deep within the mountains of eastern Kentucky where the blue grass, the high weeds, and the kudzu grow. This environment created the perfect inspiration for the record, and it’s been an honor to add some extra magic to the sessions.

-Dom Flemons
The American Songster
September 9, 2020