FOLK MUSIC IN NEW ENGLAND: A LIVING TRADITION

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### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MFC</td>
<td>Maine Fiddle Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHMC</td>
<td>Northeast Heritage Music Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAM</td>
<td>Peacham Acoustic Music</td>
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<tr>
<td>YTD</td>
<td>Young Tradition Vermont</td>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the nineteenth century fiddle playing in New England has been part of a folk music genre deeply embedded in history. Stemming from rich histories and current performance practices, this tradition greatly shapes the lives and perspectives of those that participate in it. In addition, musicians directly shape performance and cultural aspects of the music in this living tradition as well. In the course of my fieldwork throughout New England in Vermont and Maine I investigate this relationship between the music and its musicians by analyzing how music creates and reflects the identity of musicians in an accessible and holistic way. Essentially why is this music important to them, why do they continue to participate in it, and how does it impact their life? This chapter provides an introduction to this topic and personal interest in the study, a brief history and context, methodology for fieldwork, limitations, and assumptions of the research.

Related to personal and collective identity are issues such as change, participation, and preservation. These areas dive deeper into discovering how folk music is relevant to New England residents. What does fiddle playing look like today, and how have its customs evolved (or not evolved) over time? Is folk music enjoyed by many or a small number of people? If the latter, how and why do New England residents get involved with folk performance? What musical and cultural characteristics make fiddling unique to folk music in New England? How has technology and our modern world influenced this genre? What aspects of folk music are important for preservation and continued performance, and what can be done or is being done to sustain these practices? These are questions I seek to answer in this research.

At the heart of this work is my desire to preserve a snapshot in time of what traditional music in New England looks like now, what it means to participants, and how it shapes their
This topic of music and identity is of great interest to me personally. It combines two things I love very much: Vermont and the rest of New England, and the local arts celebrated by everyday people. These loves along with my background in music education create a strong personal interest for this study. While my research is not education-based, it is also important to investigate the future of Vermont folk traditions and how they are taught. What can be done to support continued performance of folk music around the region and how can the current trends continue to create and reflect New England folk identity?

Despite being a five-year Vermont resident and hoping to consider it my lifelong home, I am still an outsider to the folk music culture. This unique perspective of part foreigner and current resident allows me to connect with others who play music here from an ethnographic perspective. It is with this lens combined with my ethnomusicology and music education training that I observe and interact with folk musicians who perform fiddle music. With this research I hope to share truths about creating and maintaining musical identity as well as truths about myself and my role in supporting folk music in New England. While I do make conclusions and answers questions posed here to the best of my ability, it is important to recognize that traditional music is broader and more complex than what I can capture given limited time in the field and the large scope of folk practices. However, I aim to represent accurate perspectives of those individuals with whom I come into contact in an effort to share their stories with the world.

Final considerations are limitations of the study and assumptions about the research. The main limitations to this research are funding and time. I am mostly funding this field experience personally, so any decisions I make must be first vetted with financial consideration due to a small budget. In addition, the core time to be in the field is only about eight weeks. This relatively short window for ethnographic work requires intense and focused work to gain a
thorough enough understanding of identity and folk music to answer the research questions. This study is limited to music performed in the states of Vermont and Maine for travel and time reasons, and any participants either performing or listening to folk music in some capacity live in New England.

Another limitation to this study involves defining the musical parameters of the research. I use the phrase ‘folk music in New England’ as opposed to ‘New England folk music’ when describing this music. While a distinct New England repertoire and style of fiddle playing do exist, my research does include but is not limited to New England music only. Rather, this study includes many styles of folk music as it relates to fiddle playing. This research also encompasses Cape Breton, Irish, Scottish, and Québécois styles, which I have found to be the most prevalent musical traditions performed in the region at this time.

In this study the focus is on traditional folk music as opposed to contemporary. Traditional folk music is acoustic or a cappella, primarily non-commercial, and performed by everyday people for the purposes of community and enjoyment. Contemporary music can use electronic instruments and often fuses traditional music with other genres for commercial release. While public folk performances and contests exist, public recognition is not usually the main priority. Today most traditional New England musicians celebrate music simply for the sake of performing and sharing it with others. This final limitation will allow for a deeper look into one vocal genre and one instrument within the scope of traditional music rather than a broad but more shallow investigation in many folk genres.

Related to the subject of limitations of this study is clarification of terms used by members of the traditional folk community as well as throughout this thesis. First, the fiddle refers to an actual instrument while a fiddler is someone that plays it. Fiddling is the act of
making music using the fiddle. A second necessary distinction describes how folk music is transmitted. As I summarize in Chapter 4, most folk music is learned aurally through listening and then imitating. This process can look different depending on the context, but the core idea of learning through hearing and then echoing rather than looking at written notation remains the same. However, I never heard a musician describe this process by using the term aural. Instead, folk musicians describe it as ‘learning by ear.’ This idiom can be used interchangeably with the term aural, and I will use both in this research.

The primary assumptions in this study are the expectation of having willing participants and that a plethora of musical gatherings for participation and observation will occur during my window for field research. New England residents can be known for their polite but distant demeanor, but I met musicians that were eager to share their opinions and music with me. I attended as many fiddle lessons and folk music events as possible during fieldwork for exposure and diversity of information. The fieldwork occurred ideally during the summer months, which is a popular time to hear and learn about local music due to the number of camps and festivals that occur. One final assumption to consider is my personal bias towards New England as a current resident. I summarize what I learn and observe as accurately as possible without romanticizing the results despite my obvious love for the place I call home.

This introduction provides important information about this research project about identity through folk music in New England. Considerations before discussing fieldwork findings are my personal interest on the subject, subquestions about identity, a methodological overview, limitations, and assumptions about the research. Following the Literature Review (Chapter 2) and Methodology (Chapter 3) are my findings from fieldwork and conclusions about what I discover (Chapters 4 and 5). It is my hope that this research contributes to the academic
field of ethnomusicology, influences local music education practices, and that it enriches the
lives of those who participate in folk music by facilitating awareness and preservation of two
folk traditions for present and future generations.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review explores how folk music contributes to the conception of identity for residents in New England. With a special emphasis on Vermont, I consider existing research related to this area and its folk history. In addition, gaps in knowledge and data will be identified. Through five identifiable trends it is possible to observe how musicians and audience members find community and a sense of self within New England through several genres of folk music. From these trends it is possible to determine that “identity New England has in great plenty” (Botkin 1965, xviii). Researchers readily accept that music both reflects and helps create a personal and collective identity for participants. What does this process look like in New England and how has it been documented by others? In this chapter, I investigate identity through examples of fiddle music within the folk music genre. As I continue to craft my own identity as a new Vermonter and folk music novice, this literature review serves as a starting point for fieldwork and others’ interest in the New England folk music scene.

Fiddle playing comes from an Anglo-American tradition that stems from Scottish, Irish, and English roots with a splash of French-Canadian influence. People that learned and performed folk music in New England were originally rural residents of low economic status. Now folk music is still performed primarily by white Americans but who come from more varied backgrounds. Since moving to Vermont five years ago, I personally feel such a strong connection to the practical and kind people that reside in the state. Despite being a Vermont resident, I still feel like an outsider looking in. It is with these relatively fresh eyes and ears that I study New England folk culture. It has been my dream to connect a love of folk music and a love of Vermont through my ethnomusicology studies. My hope is to follow in the footsteps of Margaret MacArthur, “Vermont’s First Lady of Folk,” and her predecessor Helen Flanders by providing
fieldwork research that recognizes the incredible folk culture that still exists in the region (Carpenter 2002, 68).

Before jumping into New England and Vermont specific folk music, what exactly is folk music? Throughout history, what were the goals of those that performed and advocated for folk music? Today, the term folk music exists on a wide spectrum of definitions and comes in many forms depending on the individual listening or performing it. Folk music can refer to commercially produced singer/songwriter music, or it exists between two people jamming informally for their own enjoyment. It can include singing and/or instruments as an accompaniment or the main melodic material. It can include a distinct separation between audience and performers, or the lines can become blurred when participants are both. Folk music exists in many places around the world and is celebrated by many cultures. However, for the purposes of this literature review and subsequent field research, I narrow my focus to instrumental folk music that is melodic and usually acoustic, repetitive due to its dance origins, is performed informally by local people and is usually accompanied by dancing, and has centuries-old roots in American history and tradition.

Much research exists on the history of what many people would call folk music during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as it relates to national identity. The term folk music was first created by American nationalist intellectuals in the nineteenth century after desiring a distinct separation from their prior English rulers. Ann Ostendorf describes this period of history in detail with other authors such as William G. Roy, Kip Lornell, and Rachel Clare Donaldson also providing rich descriptions of American folk music culture.

Inspired by a sense of inferiority, fear their national experiment might fail, the need to unify previously distinct colonies, and a divisive political culture, the new nation’s members searched for what they perceived to be distinctive American traits and forms that could be encouraged as a way to solidify the nation (Ostendorf 2011, 20).
Unfortunately, this quest for a uniquely American sound labeled and organized local music for the use of the higher class and often excluded the music of people of color. Both Ostendorf and Roy agree that this one-sided portrayal of folk music that mostly included Anglo-based ballads misrepresented the musical tastes of Americans, “creating an imagined community” (Roy 2002, 462). The “folk” were marginalized and folk music became very racially charged. Since then folk music has experienced two other distinct phases, with today’s current folk music trends still developing.

The second phase in American folk history began in the 1930s when folk music was used as a political platform and was more about class than race. Musicians like Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and Alan Lomax “all promot[ed] the music of groups they did not belong to themselves, sincerely convinced that members of those other groups should identify with ‘the folk’” (Roy 2002, 465). Phase three was the famous revival period that began in the 1960s and reverted back to prior association with white identity despite being connected to the Civil Rights movement. This phase of folk music is known for its commercial production and live performances. Folk music appealed to listeners because of its distance from mainstream music. Folk music became “‘their’ music because it helped them imagine themselves as someone other than who they feared they were: white middle-class consumers” (Roy 2002, 467). In all three phases, folk music was regarded as belonging to the “Other,” never really culturally owned by the different groups that performed it. As later examined, we see a shift towards more authentic ownership and identity by those performing it today.

The 1960s counterculture period is the last distinct stage of the evolution of American folk music that has been heavily researched. Small amounts of work and short ethnographies have been done since then but comprehensive American folk music research between 1970 and
today is lacking, especially from the New England area. Some existing New England works are Clifford Murphy’s dissertation on Western country music and Richard Blaustein’s fiddle contest focused field experience but these works are dated and not focused on musical identity. Much of the existing research around folk music and identity has a national emphasis rather than a more localized significance that my work aims to concentrate on. Examples of such nationally focused ethnographic work about the nineteenth century are Donaldson’s *I Hear America Singing* ethnography and Roy’s *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*.

Most importantly, the main interest of researchers appears to be promoting the very existence of New England folk music. While New England is not as widely known for its folk culture as perhaps Appalachia is, vernacular music has been and is a vibrant part of this area. “New England itself has always seemed a little too well scrubbed and literate to be a folk culture,” but nonetheless “New England has folk culture, even if it’s a little more literate than the South or Appalachia” (Alarik 2007, 46). Despite this apparent truth it has not received as much consideration as perhaps it actually needs because of this perceived lack of folk culture.

Some authors connect the existence of New England folk music with the vague and nostalgic idea of tradition. Benjamin Albert Botkin, whose compilation of New England stories and songs is extensive, writes in his introduction that “New England has a strong oral tradition which links it with the past” (Botkin 1965, xviii). B. Marshall and S. Cope emphasize the fact that “New England has a rich cultural history marked by its long tradition of new immigrants as well as its deep traditionalism” (Marshall and Cope 2004, n.p.). However, the notion of tradition along with the image of picturesque New England may be somewhat of an ill-defined illusion.
The statements by these authors probably have some truth in them, but others are attempting to uncover what lies beneath the so-called traditional culture of this region.

The issue of fantasy versus reality is a concern when discussing New England folk music. It is also a factor when considering identity of New England residents, as it can cause disorientation in how others view locals instead of how it actually is. From an outsider’s view New England appears to be “peaceful and homogeneous” with an emphasis on tradition, community, and independence (O’Keefe 2018, n.p.). It is advertised as a rural and inviting place to live and tourists bring home stories of maple sugar shacks, ski lodges, and quaint towns with kind residents. Consequently, a view of New England can be superficial and a little too perfect. In the example of Vermont, “the result may increasingly be some measure of artifice, where Vermont remains eternally ‘Vermont,’ at least on the surface, while the messy work of social change and conflict simmers underneath” (Hinrichs 1996, 274).

One simmering idea that exists below the surface of New England is despite its relative diversity, residents can experience musical isolation. “New England has a history of neighborhoods and towns made up of tight ethnic enclaves, which can be culturally rich and interesting but also can manifest attitudes and prejudices that are insular and parochial. This has resulted in the nurturing of ethnic music . . . but can also keep scenes very localized and sometimes inhibits growth” (Marshall and Cope 2004, n.p.). On a larger scale Lornell suggests that folk music everywhere in the United States exists in a similar way. “Regional folk music in the United States is not dead, it remains lurking just below the consciousness of popular culture always at the ready to be discovered and revived yet again” (Lornell 278, 2012). This is where the help of a researcher gaining an insider perspective to bring music to the forefront is helpful.
My focus is only on Anglo-American fiddling, but clearly much more work can be done within New England communities to celebrate and share their music with each other and the world.

Margaret MacArthur and Helen Flanders are two women that chose to investigate Vermont folk music specifically. Their song collections and efforts to preserve the state’s local music are important contributions to the existing repertoire of New England music. Despite their decades of commitment to Vermont music very little has been done with the original recordings, transcripts, and other materials besides making them available to the public. MacArthur lived from 1928-2006 and spent much of her life learning music from her friends and family. She recorded several CDs of the songs she collected and is known for her proficiency on dulcimer. An article in the folk magazine *Sing Out!* describes her as a “country-living woman who has woven the strongest cloth of New England folk traditions through generations with song, folk music, and honest living” (Carpenter 2002, 68).

Her predecessor and mentor Helen Flanders began collecting songs in 1930. Her lifework currently resides on display in Middlebury College. Cockrell details what sorts of items can be found in this collection, describing it as being “now widely recognized as the largest and most complete record of traditional music from this area” (Cockrell 1982, 31). It includes over five thousand songs and also contains newspaper articles, lecture notes, letters, photographs, and books that have been added by others over the years. Lissa Schneckenburger, a well-known New England fiddle player, has used this collection as a resource for songs. Through her playing of these songs, she wants to “call attention to traditional music from America’s Yankee States” (Reel 2009, n.p.). Since the 1960s, others have also expressed a renewed interest in folk music performed in New England.
During the third phase of American folk music’s evolution, a famous folk festival took place in Newport, Rhode Island in 1963. This event spurred a greater interest in New England focused research. It was a festival inspired by political and civil rights issues that featured a variety of folk musicians. This folk music gave people a substitute to then-popular music. “While the importance of Newport to popular acceptance of regional-ethnic musical traditions still implied a northeastern commercial establishment, it also signaled an alternative to the mass marketed blandness of the recording industry” (Bronner 1998, 23-4). This alternative style of music caused a rise in popularity in New England music scenes. A club in Cambridge in particular became known for its folk music. “With Club Passim – the renamed Club 47 – as its center, folk musicians have gravitated to the New England region. Folk music as it was in the 1960s – mainly a singer-songwriter playing with an acoustic guitar – was a common attraction both in clubs around the area and among street musicians” (Marshall and Cope 2004, n.p.). New England became a central location for the folk revival, a place where people found identity in the sharing of this foil to popular music.

Today it is possible to put together characteristics and trends of current New England folk music through bits and pieces of work done by various researchers. Sources of magazine articles, chapters in books, and a few ethnographic accounts contain important folk music discussions. However, considering the apparent folk presence in the region, not a sizeable amount of New England specific research has been done. Clearly this is a location in need of more ethnomusicological attention! What follows summarizes five current folk music trends as they relate to the Anglo-American traditions of fiddling.

First, folk music today is a hybrid from many traditions, which “keeps traditional American music in constant evolution” (Lornell 2012, 25). Folk music in New England is no
exception. Fiddler Schneckenburger describes New England fiddle music as “bits and pieces that have melted together into a distinctive style” (Reel 2009, n.p.). Other traditional styles of fiddle playing also have unique sounds due to their complex and messy history. Instrumental folk music today comes from music that once existed in Europe that early settlers brought with them during colonialization. Americans with widely varied backgrounds and preferences continue to influence these genres of folk music. While folk music is becoming more specialized by style today as I will summarize in my research findings, these overlaps of hybridization still exist.

Second, New England folk music seems to be impacted and perpetuated by the weather, believe it or not. Performers find community in resisting the long and brutal winters together with music. During many dark days and few opportunities for outdoor recreation, music is a comfort, a source of amusement, and a chance to advance in musical skill. Historically, “long winters and limited social opportunities bred accomplished musicians – especially fiddlers – who practiced their craft for personal and family entertainment and in preparation for community events” (Marshall and Cope 2004, n.p.).

Marshall, Cope, and Ostendorf even argue that the style of folk music can be characteristic of the region’s weather and terrain. In the previous nationalist effort to unify American folk music, “natural scenery exerted an influence on the character of a nation’s music” (Ostendorf 41, 2011). Specific to New England, one modern folk group labeled as “Americana” nods to both bluegrass and rock. This genre is greatly influenced by the harshness of the mountains of Vermont, New Hampshire, or Maine, as well as traditional French Canadian fiddle music found in small towns around the area. The lyrics and mood of the music express the extreme weather, change of seasons, and winter loneliness felt by northerners who have traditionally toiled to subsist in a difficult landscape, and the music has an edge that its southern bluegrass cousin doesn’t (Marshall and Cope 2004, n.p.).
New Englanders seem to be proud of being known for their common ability to tough out long winters. This attitude is maintained through collective identity formation with the help of folk music.

Third, research shows a shift from active to more passive participation in New England folk performance has taken place. Once people used to have casual musical gatherings with family and friends where everyone participated. According to research some participatory-based folk events still take place, but less community singing exists overall. Now, “active social singing has been replaced by listening” (Koskoff 2000, 188). Fewer performers showcase their skills publicly and more non-expert listeners make intentional choices to hear these few. Performances are actualized through jam sessions, house concerts, fiddle contests, folk and festivals. Such intentionally scheduled events allow folk music to thrive, albeit in a different presentation than before. Public performance and communal playing inspires new musicians to play or sing folk music, maintains current practices of musicians, and “give non-performers satisfying alternatives to commercial entertainment” (Blaustein 211, 1994). In my field experience I discovered certain aspects of folk music to be incredibly participatory, which contradicts these previous claims and will be later discussed.

Fourth, social messages are communicated through New England folk music. What sort of social meaning is being transmitted? Roy describes the prevalence of such folk festivals and subsequent revivals as an “activity of academic and amateur folklorists who created and refined the concept of folk music, self-consciously promoting it as a genre with specific social meaning” (Roy 2010, 49). Ellen Koskoff also comments on messaging through folk music.

Younger singers offer new and revised songs that less often repeat and recreate images of the past, than comment on the present. Rather than representing broad sentiments and issues regarding an intergenerational community, they speak for a single generation, or social group, of listeners. The environment has changed and
so have the songs that northern New England communities support” (Koskoff 2000, 188).

Statements like these about social meaning indicates more investigation through fieldwork is needed to determine what exactly is being communicated to the public and what the goals are of the performers. Apparently messages are being conveyed, but what those messages are and how they are received is still unclear in existing research. My results and findings do offer some thoughts on communication during music making.

Fifth, New England folk music today is influenced and shaped by technology. Recording devices play a useful role in folk music to assist musicians as a tool to increase their skills. Despite the high level of music literacy in New England, folk music is often transmitted by ear. With the help of recording devices as “learning resources,” musicians experienced in aural learning and for those wishing to transition from reading notation to listening can both benefit (Green 2017, n.p.). For fiddle players, “taping has become an integral feature of the contemporary oldtime fiddling scene in the United States” (Blaustein 1994, 214-15). Particularly at fiddle contests, Blaustein suggests that recording performances is useful for judging, personal reflection, and to share with others how to improve technique and learn new repertoire.

Availability of commercially recorded music may have actually helped folk music survive. “It was the recording industry . . . that made possible the very production as well as transmission of multifarious substyles that transcended the home and community, being heard by and appealing to people across geographical areas” (Green 2017, n.p.). Although folk musicians do not normally receive national recognition like more mainstream genres, their music can still be heard by a larger audience. Some folk musicians in New England record their music on CDs and for radio appearances heard by regional listeners. Vermont Public Radio’s folk segment entitled All the Traditions highlights the “many talented musicians who live in the VPR listening
area” (Resnik n.d., n.p.). Folk performers in New England usually cannot support themselves from their music alone, but recording technology allows them to receive some compensation for their music. I offer additional ways technology has impacted folk music practices in Chapter 4, but the basic pretense of its influence is certainly true.

These five ideas can be connected to identity formation within the New England region. K.A. Schafft believes that because folk music is “rooted in traditions or cultures of people informally making music together,” anyone exposed to it is influenced by it and can influence it (Schafft 2013, n.p.). This concept reinforces local identity because “it invites the listener to consider the possibility that she or he need not simply be a listener, but might be a participant and a maker of music as part of a longer, even historical, process of cultural expression” (Schafft 2013, n.p.). Whether welcomed into the folk world as a casual listener or long-term aficionado, folk music in New England affects people in the way they experience the place they call home.

To summarize, this literature review examines what research exists on American folk music with a specific focus on New England and further concentration on Vermont. I provided a brief history of the three phases of folk music. The current phase is still being formed and in need of more study. Folk music in New England is rich and thriving but in mostly isolated pockets. Researchers have chosen to give their attention to ideas of tradition, perception versus reality, and compiling the work of others that came before them. With the help of Anglo-American fiddle playing and shape note singing studies, five large ideas emerge that contribute to local identity creation. They are hybridization, influences of weather, active to passive listening, communication of social messages, and influences of technology. I add to and also clarify several of these trends in my conclusions. Overall, my results generally support the
existing literature but add more depth to folk music’s current reality and future especially as it relates to personal experiences and impact.

Lornell believes that “regional folk music ha[s] not expired, it merely (all but) disappeared from the commercial marketplace . . . such traditions are submerged from the view of most Americans, who remain largely ignorant of the regional traditions across the United States outside of their immediate view or own experience” (Lornell 2012, 258-59). During my fieldwork I investigated if this statement is true and uncovered a rich and thriving musical culture hidden from the view of most New Englanders.

Significant lacunae exist in ethnomusicological research about current New England folk music. My goal is that this work serves not only the academic realm but also the local community, contributing to sustainability, interest in, and awareness of folk music. The ramifications of my data collection pertain to the academic community as well as impact the real lives and stories of New England residents. I hope that my thesis and any future publications will spark more attention to this region and its local music, potentially inspiring ethnographic work from others.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Prior to performing research, planning is a critical step for success. Important considerations are fieldwork procedures, participant criteria, research tools, methodology for data collection, and ramifications after research. This chapter will summarize these areas as it relates to my field research experience and this thesis. Despite inevitable changes between planning and reality I was immersed in a rich cultural experience that both meets academic deadlines and furthers the study of ethnomusicology in the area of folk music in New England.

The basic format for fieldwork was simple. Information was collected primarily during attendance and participation at Northeast Heritage Music Camp and Maine Fiddle Camp. In addition I obtained data through weekly fiddle lessons, jam sessions, and a festival called the Peacham Acoustic Music Festival. For the first half of fieldwork, private fiddle instruction was taught by Sarah Hotchkiss, a fiddler who began as a classically trained musician then transitioned into folk playing. For the second half of the experience lessons were taught by John Mowad who has extensive knowledge and expertise on New England playing.

Another procedure to consider is the fact that this field experience took place in my home region. Unlike ethnomusicologists who travel and are completely removed from their local environment, this field experience was somewhat embedded within my normal life. As Jonathan P.J. Stock and Chou Chiener write, “The other now lives next door” (Stock and Chiener 2008, 110). Similar to Blacking’s students where “the field was all around them every day, and field study, attending classes, part-time work, family life, and writing-up all overlapped.” I too had various personal commitments during this experience (Stock and Chiener 2008, 109). Therefore, a strict schedule was required to differentiate how I spent my time. Monday through Thursday
was considered time in the field, while weekends or camp weeks (excepting the weekends with folk events) were preserved for leisure, church, and self-reflection on the experience.

Only a few criteria were used for participants to share their experiences with me for this study. They were over age eighteen, male or female. Participants had little or extensive experience with folk music, but it was a part of their lives in some way. In addition, participants were residents of New England. Lastly, participants had a willingness to share their perspectives with me about how folk music impacts them. Collecting essential data for the research took the form of interviews and participant observation. While I gathered a wide variety of answers through many interviews, I collected a significant amount of data through several key informants. Fiddle teachers Sarah Hotchkiss and John Mowad, who are experts in fiddle playing, were open and available for my many questions. Word of mouth proved effective, as all of my contacts suggested the names of more experts that were able to help me.

Interviews mostly took place during the weeks of NHMC and MFC. I typically interviewed musicians that I came to know through our participation in the same classes and workshops. This approach was helpful in building trust and friendship before asking questions, and I found many participants willing to share the profound effects folk music has in their lives. I tried to find a diverse group of interviewees from all over New England with various levels of playing proficiency and years of experience. Interviews lasted anywhere from twenty minutes to over an hour depending on how long folk music had been a part of their lives and how much they were willing to share. Often times I interviewed participants outdoors in private locations, but the sounds of folk tunes played by other campgoers often pervaded in the backgrounds of our conversations. Sometimes hearing participants’ responses was difficult in the moment or when
listening back later via audio recording due to this music being played, but the nonstop playing during the weeks of camp added to its atmosphere of inclusivity and camaraderie.

Another useful way to gather data was through observations and reflections as a beginner student in the genre. I learned fiddle with no previous playing experience, only having learned the basics of the violin playing during a strings class in my undergraduate years. I aimed to learn in an authentic way by ear rather than using notation that I was previously more comfortable with. While written notation is sometimes used in the folk world, discussed in Chapter 4, I did my best to only train my ear to have the most immersed experience possible. I also attempted to play with others during camps and jams which allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of fiddle performance firsthand. I practiced fiddling regularly and attended events as a participant. I sang in weekly singings and was immersed in folk events in a way that actually moved beyond research and became more personal.

Fiddle music is mostly transmitted through lessons, camps, jams, and personal research. Similar to many folk musicians, my introduction to learning tunes was via private music lessons. I began fiddle lessons with Sarah Hotchkiss, who, like myself, had a classical background before transitioning to folk. Our weekly lessons involved learning the mechanics of the instrument and playing simple tunes. Already present at this early point in my field experience was an instant accessibility to music-making despite my very minor background playing violin.

Within a week of starting, I was making music. One interviewee commented that after only a few lessons with a basic competency, “you have what you need” (Bennet-O’Dea 2019). From there, a fiddle player can take ownership of their learning, a truth I experienced on this journey to understand folk music via participation. Not only did taking lessons give me an immediate ability to play tunes, my experience with Sarah opened doors for new opportunities
within the folk community per her invitation to a folk music camp and recommendations of other people to speak with. As Sarah stated, fiddle playing “grows exponentially once you get hooked” (Hotchkiss 2019).

Once I learned the basics of fiddle playing I transitioned to taking lessons from John Mowad, who often sought to glean his playing style and approach from fiddlers from the nineteenth century. Typically I learned one new tune a week, slowly adding to my repertoire and expanding my skill set. When teaching a tune, John would play it in its entirety. Then by breaking it down phrase by phrase, I would attempt to echo what I heard. This call and response method frequently included a conversation about analysis of the tune’s overall form and notable patterns as well as discussion about smaller musical moments such as arpeggios or repeated passages to aid ear learning and memory. Learning and playing tunes during my participation at NHMC and MFC happened similarly through mostly call and response, as well as active listening and singing back melodies before trying to play them.

During fieldwork I recorded this data using several simple research tools. Interviews, tune melodies learned in classes, and music lessons were recorded using the voice memo app on an iPhone SE and then uploaded to an Asus laptop. I also used the iPhone camera to record video during camp workshops and classes as well as some performances. Paper and pencil were used for jotting ideas from observing performances. Because I was learning so much music in a short time, I also began a handwritten tune record book that included some basic transcriptions of melodies I learned and background information about the music for later memory recall. While I still played primarily by ear, this tune book became an invaluable resource for reference the more music I learned. Any handwritten notes were organized and compiled electronically.
Since this topic of folk music revolves around the creation and reflection of personal identity through music, my main methodology was narrative.

Narratives focus on knowledge, beliefs, behavior, and personal reflections and insight. They are used to study how people practice their professions, how they learn to carry out tasks, how they come to know about their world, and how they experience transitions that take place while aging (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 120).

While folk musicians are not seen as subaltern or culturally suppressed like some other musical communities, not a lot of research exists that highlights their history and current practices so this method seemed successful in giving voice to individuals.

Using a narrative approach was useful in “‘giving voice’ to people whose experiences are not well known in the mainstream of their society” (LeCompte and Schensul 121). This approach was solidified and even enhanced through genuine friendships with the people I met. Through a narrative method within a rapid compressed design, I sought to “assemble a composite picture” of folk customs and better “understand the role and experiences of individuals” through interviews, observation, and music performance (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 118).
Chapter 4: Research Findings

Within pockets of New England, fiddle musicians find their identity rooted deeply in history. In addition to looking to the past, today’s participants also directly influence the performance practices and customs of folk culture that become part of its future. This mindset informs a meaningful and creative approach to their music-making. Folk music as a living tradition was embedded into every event that I observed or participated in during my field experience in Vermont. Vital within this framework is the overarching idea of accessibility for participants, musically and socially. My research findings, which firmly establish folk music as an accessible living tradition, are divided into two main components of analysis – the transmission of music and its people, individually and collectively.

Fiddle Tune Basics

The tunes that I learned, like most fiddle tunes, are in 4/4, 6/8, 3/4, or cut time. A fiddle tune has an A and B section, and then the song is repeated. Repertoire is typically in first position and heavily relies on notes on the D and A strings on the fiddle, while the E string is less frequently played, with the G string even less so. Intermediate fiddle tunes are usually in G or D major. These components are the musical building blocks of fiddle music because of the original intent of their performance, community dancing. Live music requires a form that is danceable, contains repetitions, and includes melodies that are physically comfortable for the musicians to play during those many repetitions. In addition, the style and bowing of fiddle tunes is influenced heavily by dancing, which will be discussed later.
Relating all parts of a tune to dancing is a priority for fiddlers in their desire to reach back to the historic roots of the genre. In fact, John articulated that his main goal for fiddling is “to become a dance player” (John Mowad, June 20, 2019, personal communication to author). This perspective provides a solid grounding for fiddle performance that he and other musicians return to again and again. In their most basic form, fiddle tunes may seem simplistic in structure and playability. In some ways, this idea is true and contributes to the idea of accessibility, especially for new beginners. However, many musicians I interviewed expressed that fiddle tunes can be just as complex and nuanced as other types of music due to variations, ornamentation, bowing, and other stylistic elements that individuals bring to their playing.

Music lessons provide a starting point for musicians in New England. Some people take only a few lessons to get started with playing fiddle, while others continue lessons for years as they develop their craft. Overall, one-on-one lessons provide a jumping point for learning and sharing music, as well as information about other opportunities for involvement in the folk community musically and socially.

Folk Music Camps

Another way fiddle music is transmitted is during camps that usually take place during the summer months. Often a week-long and held at campgrounds all around New England, folk music camps are for adult learners but some are more family-oriented and open to children. Some camps are more fiddle specific, such as the Maine Fiddle Camp (MFC) in Montville, Maine or Fiddle Hell in Westford, Massachusetts. Others are geared more towards a specific style of playing but open to many instruments, like the Scottish Fiddle School off the Boston Harbor at Thompson Island. Still other camps are open to all instruments and abilities, such as
the Northeast Heritage Music Camp (NHMC) in Starksboro, Vermont. I had the privilege of attending NHMC and MFC during my field experience.

The existence of camps for transmission and dissemination of folk music is a fairly new concept. Only in the past ten or fifteen years have camps become a major part of a typical musicians’ folk music experience in New England. At one time people learned tunes informally from family and friends, but today there is more intentionality in creating opportunities for musicians to gather and learn from one another. “Fewer and fewer people have been or are being born directly into a community tradition” of multigenerational music-making, so these camps provide an outlet for this shift (John Mowad, July 16, 2019, personal communication to author).

Camps in New England are often attended by local residents, but musicians also come from other parts of the United States and abroad. While people attend particular camps for many reasons, some do because it is their only opportunity to interact with other folk musicians during the year. Unfortunately, fiddle playing opportunities are minimal to none in some areas of the world, including New England. For example, Rae Frazer, who lives in northern New Hampshire, only experiences folk music with others when she attends NHMC and Fiddle Hell, or when she has lessons with her teacher across the border in Vermont.

I recognize the important responsibility of the lone folk musician to bring back the tunes they learn at camps and share them with their local community. Along with sharing the actual melodies with others, they also “hopefully bring the energy and spirit of this [camp] experience” back home with them (Sutherland 2019). Despite no jams in her area, Rae works to bring the spirit and melodies of folk music to her local classical violin trio by teaching the other musicians tunes by ear. Camps provide musicians opportunities to interact with tunes in a new way and present unique avenues of learning and sharing that never existed before.
Daily workshops, performances, and jams take place at these camps. Facilitated by staff who specialize in specific instruments and/or styles, camps have created a “comfortable business” for these musicians who are considered experts in their area (Benet-O’Dea 2019). During Northeast Heritage Music Camp and Maine Fiddle Camp, three blocks of time each day were for classes. Classes at NHMC were specific to a style of folk music, such as Irish, Cape Breton, or Québécois music, or they were geared towards a skill level (novice, intermediate, or advanced), or both. MFC classes were divided into six different skill levels for both adults and youth, and the instructors for each group chose what style of tunes was taught. Each class built upon itself each day, with the instructors teaching new tunes and stylistic elements that increased in difficulty over the week. At the end of the week, each class performed during a final concert to showcase the learning that happened over the five days.

Classes varied in size from three to twenty-five people and instructors used a variety of oral teaching techniques for sharing tunes. Sheet music does play a role in folk music transmission as a tool to aid learning but is only supplemental to the process. While learning music aurally usually takes longer upfront than reading sheet music, especially in a group setting, the benefits seem to outweigh the extra time needed. Learning music by ear is superior for long term memory retention and provides a way to understand the character of the music more easily. When asked why ear learning is important in fiddle playing tradition, teacher Katie Newell responded that you “get it into your heart,” more deeply than if the player simply read it from a page (Newell 2019). In addition, learning and playing by ear provides a greater awareness of presence in the performance and the individual’s contribution to the group. The one time during NHMC I witnessed someone look at sheet music was when an instructor used it for reference to play a tune ‘straight’ without any embellishments or ornamentation when teaching during a class.
session. At MFC another instructor passed out sheet music, but only at the end of the week once we learned the tunes completely first.

Similar to John, an instructor would introduce a tune by playing it, usually in the way they would typically perform it with variations or embellishments. They also provided the name of the tune, relevant historical information about it, and what key it was in. The teacher would share the name of the starting pitch and sometimes a helpful hint about the first few notes. Due to the large number of tunes I learned at each camp, it was often difficult to remember how a particular tune started. However, once I got help from another camper or memory tool I could play the entire melody. Therefore, an emphasis on the first few notes of a tune is critical for retention. After this introduction to the tune, two main methods of group teaching were used.

The first method is the phrase by phrase process (see Figure 1). With this technique, the instructor played one phrase at a time with the class echoing what they heard several times before moving on to the next phrase to repeat the process. This method was more commonly used for novice or intermediate level players. As an alternative to the call and response method, some instructors played the entire A section slowly repeatedly, encouraging players to join in whenever they could, until most of the group was able to play the entire section. This same process was applied to learning the B section before piecing the entire tune together. The latter method is more practical to prepare musicians to participate in jam sessions since new tunes are shared and learned this way, but the former is preferred for those less experienced in learning by ear.
With both approaches, instructors always spot-checked problem areas and answered questions for clarification. Sometimes the focus was just on learning the notes first, while other times bowing and the notes were integrated from the start. Another frequent teaching technique found in either of the above methods was to encourage the class to sing or hum the melody as it was played by the instructor. Only when we could sing it correctly did we attempt to play it. Singing provides fiddlers with another tool to understand the swells and falls of a melody as well as the rhythm. This understanding through the voice and brain then translates to the fingers and bow when it is time to pick up the instrument. During the teaching of a tune instructors would be sure to provide short breaks, having discussions, stretching, or answering questions. The breaks tested the class’s short-term memory and gave our bodies a physical rest before playing once more to see what was retained.
Early in my field experience I attended intermediate classes in Irish, Cape Breton, and Québécois styles of fiddling during my week at NHMC. At MFC, which occurred later in my field experience, I participated in an intermediate level three out of six. Despite only having picked up the fiddle mere weeks into my fieldwork, by the end of NHMC I learned nine new fiddle tunes. I was able to play them all from memory with an adequate degree of proficiency at a moderate tempo, which attests to the accessibility of this kind of music. In addition to learning new tunes at classes, other notable events at camp included concerts by faculty, daily contra dancing backed by live musicians, and formal and jamming. All of these events provided opportunities to build community and gain skill and experience.

**Jams**

Jams are an opportunity to learn new tunes and partake in a low-pressure collaborative performance meant to be enjoyed only by the musicians without an audience. Jams can be more formalized and scheduled or they are loosely planned and happen spontaneously. I witnessed and participated in a variety of jams along this spectrum during my field experience. Jams I attended mostly took place during NHMC and MFC as well as PAM Fest, but I also attended an additional slow jam in Williston, VT near my home and one in Chester, VT hosted and attended by NHMC participants. In the broadest sense, jams include musicians who play folk instruments such as fiddle, banjo, mandolin, accordion, flute, and guitar. People sit in chairs in a circle and take turns choosing tunes for the group to play. Sometimes this happens when a melody is played by one member of the group and others simply join in, or musicians go around the room and take turns calling tunes in a more formal structure.
Typically the person who starts the tune or requested it be played is responsible for determining when it ends. The group repeats the tune until a verbal or physical signal is given. The leader can call out “one more time” or hold one finger up to indicate a final repeat. Or, the leader lifts their foot off the ground during the playing of a B section to indicate it is the end.

Music from any tradition can be brought into a jam, but sometimes jams can take on a particular flavor or style depending on the musicians present. This process of informal “tune-swapping brings strangers together” (Titon 2001, 10). Another variation is the speed of the jam.

Spontaneous or planned jams can be fast-paced with high energy and are meant for very experienced players, while intentionally planned slow or moderate jams are more friendly for relaxed tempos.

Certain unspoken etiquette rules exist within a jam. Normally when a tune is played by the leader for the first and sometimes second time it is performed simply without any ornamentation or variations. The reason for doing so is to give musicians who may not know the tune a chance to become familiar with its basic melody. In addition, this process allows for the group to hear how the leader is playing the tune. Especially during a camp jam where people come from all over the world, melodic and rhythmic variations of the same tunes are plentiful. A priority that Sarah emphasized during a slow jam is to show sensitivity if a tune is played differently by the person who led it out of respect to their interpretation of it.

When I asked John if it was acceptable to play a tune in a jam differently than the person who led it, he answered that it depends on the individual situation. One key idea to consider is: Does the leader have more experience and knowledge than you? If so, he believes the proper etiquette is to defer to their version. Another consideration is: How much the two variations differ? If the variation is minor and does not clash significantly with the group, playing a
variation may be acceptable in the jam. However, if the variation does clash significantly, John believes the less experienced player should defer to the version of the more experienced player. This process could mean letting the latter player lead the tune while the former tries to follow, or it could mean that the less experienced player plays their version much quieter or just listens. Overall he agrees the issue requires sensitivity and an a high level of awareness of the musician attending the jam.

Another courtesy within jams is to make everyone feel comfortable. This principle means no showing off or virtuosic playing for the sake of personal attention. Jams are about making music socially for the purpose of enjoyment and learning in a relaxed context. At its core, folk music “is a social music. It can’t be understood without knowing that the jam is its heart, and friendly interaction is the underlying occasion” (Titon 11). Participants also have the freedom to leave if the jam is too fast-paced without being considered impolite. In addition, musicians can participate in any way they wish, whether that be sitting or listening, standing in the back and playing, or only playing a few notes in a tune. Personally, I took small mental breaks to make it through a longer jam session and saw others do the same. To do this, I occasionally stopped playing and just listened. While my stamina for learning and playing by ear increased significantly over the summer, these short breaks were still necessary for my participation for the duration of the jam.

Even in the more structured faculty or camper concerts at NHMC and MFC, an essence of jamming was evident. Rarely did a staff member or camper play a solo for the audience. Instead, each performance was filled with collaboration and communication between the multiple performers onstage. In my reflections after one particularly memorable concert, I wrote, “I think I am beginning to understand the spirit of folk music . . . these performances are more
like a polished jam session with predetermined tunes for the enjoyment of many. Tonight, there were beautiful, genuine moments of spontaneity that occurred by the performers and also in the audience.”

At one time in history jams occurred casually among family and friends. At camps unscheduled jams are possible due to the concentration of musicians eager to play with one another. However, with folk music only thriving in select communities around New England, jams outside of camp settings require more intentional planning. I attended two jams like this in Vermont. In Williston, Vermont a slow jam was facilitated by Sarah and John. “In the slow jam the learners hang back, play tentatively at first, then join in with more confidence as the tune repeats” (Titon 24). These slow jams are scheduled every other month and have an emphasis on tune sharing between more novice and intermediate players.

This particular jam was held at the home of two folk musicians and had definitive start and end times. The structure of facilitation, slow tempo of playing, and somewhat grouping tunes based on similar keys all contributed to a more education-based approach to jamming. At this point in my fiddle playing I had a greater degree of technical mastery as well as an increased ability to learn by ear. This slow jam was a delightful opportunity to recognize my own progress and learn more tunes from a group of strangers that felt like friends by the end of the night. The second jam I attended was hosted by a NHMC camper who lived in Chester, Vermont. This jam was meant for musicians who attended NHMC and wanted to play together again. This gathering was more of a moderate and sometimes fast paced session, as participants of many skill levels were in attendance.

Jamming provides folk musicians with a place to make and share music with each other, regardless of skill level or background in a particular style. All folk players can participate in the
“spontaneous confluence” that occurs during a jam (Carol Dickson, June 27, 2019, personal communication). Sometimes participation merely takes the form of listening on the outskirts of the circle. Other times it means plucking a few notes that are easy to pick out, perhaps increasing in number with each repetition of the tune. For more experienced players, it means choosing and leading tunes. As a newer fiddler, I played along minimally during designated moderate jams at camp but could participate most of the time during the slow jam even with tunes I did not know previously. As I gained confidence, skill, and experience, I joined in more frequently and I discovered an increasing amount of enjoyment and feeling of belonging.

**Tools for Learning Tunes**

In addition to lessons, camps, and jams being the primary ways to share fiddle tunes, sheet music and technology are tools that can aid the learning process. Many of the musicians I interacted with began their musical journey classically before transitioning to fiddle. As a result, most folk musicians read music notation proficiently or enough to use it as a research or practice aid. In fact, one interviewee suggested that reading is actually a necessity within folk performance. She thinks that without the ability to read music, a person becomes “functionally illiterate” (Malkin 2019). This skill is useful for discovering new tunes as well as keeping records of tunes learned. Fiddle tune book compilations, such as *Masters of Old-Time Fiddling* or *O’Neil’s Music of Ireland: Over 1,000 Fiddle Tunes*, do exist, despite the emphasis on ear learning. These collections are resources for reference and uncovering tunes that may not be as commonly known.

However, learning from written music comes secondary to learning aurally from others and only used after considerable experience. I present this view for two reasons. First, because
folk music is a social kind of tradition that begins and ends with human interaction, not learning in isolation from a tune book. Second, because the characterization and style of a melody becomes truly apparent when it is played by someone else live. Becky Tracey, an expert fiddler in the Irish tradition of playing in New England, encountered this disconnect between the page and the actual performance when using sheet music early in her folk music playing career.

As a beginner learning violin in primary school, she tried using fiddle sheet music on the side to learn tunes. She recalls that the tunes “didn’t really make any sense . . . I was frustrated with the relationship between what I sounded like as I was reading them and what the fiddlers . . . sound[ed] like” that she heard on her father’s 78s (Tracey 2019). Once she became more involved in fiddle playing with others, her shift to ear learning “was the big discovery” that allowed her to more fully understand the spirit and character of folk music (Tracey 2019). Now she primarily plays and learns by listening but sometimes uses sheet music to discover tunes. Because she has a deep understanding of the music’s roots with all its subtleties and possible creative pathways from years of experience she is able to reconcile a tune on the page with how it should sound.

Written music is also helpful for keeping a record of tunes a person knows. Mark Sustic, executive director of Young Tradition Vermont, said that sheet music can be useful as long as “it doesn’t get in the way” of playing (Sustic 2019). In other words, he believes a tune should not be played the exact same way forever and that using music can actually be a hindrance to playing if it is relied on too much. Musicians of all levels that I interacted with corroborated this mindset with how they use sheet music not as their main source material, but as an aid to learning. While learning tunes aurally is ideal for folk music transmission, it is not a perfect system. Although improvement in maintaining tunes once they are learned is possible with regular practice, our
brains can muddle together or forget tunes. This ‘tune-nesia’ can happen to beginners just
starting or to advanced players who preserve repertoire in their minds and muscle memory for
long periods of time. John agrees that “memory plays tricks on fiddlers” (Mowad 2019).
Therefore, keeping a tune bank can help players avoid falling victim to tune-nesia!

A tune bank looks different for everyone. During classes at NHMC and MFC, many
fiddlers used a notebook to write down the names and keys of the new tunes they were learning.
Another aspect of the tune bank could include titles, keys, notable elements in the tune, and a
transcription of the opening phrase(s) for the A and/or B melodies (Figure 2). As I stated before,
remembering how a tune starts is often the hardest part to recalling a melody. Another
challenging element is remembering which tune goes with which title. More than once I
witnessed a fiddler begin a tune to lead at a jam but not be able to recall its title or know the
name of a tune they liked but not able to recall its melody. Some fiddlers use mnemonic devices
to tackle this problem or merely ask another musician to help jog their memory. This evidence
supports learning and sharing folk tunes as a collective, human endeavor.
Typically tunes written down are only a guide to playing. They are only a “rudimentary representation of what’s actually being played” (Madigan 2019). A written tune can provide a key, time signature, basic melody and rhythm, but its style, bowing, and interpretation is up to the performer. The fiddler must study its origins and hear more experienced players perform the tune to understand its character. Reasons for not including more stylistic elements in sheet music are many. Too many symbols or written ornamentation within sheet music can be confusing to read and it is also difficult to capture subtle bowings or techniques in paper form for others to understand fully. In addition, having an exact transcription of a tune would encourage that it must be played that way always, which is not what folk musicians desire. “Tunes aren’t really static things” and should be open to change (Jackson 2019). This attitude is reflected in the lack of nuanced notation in sheet music.

Even though most folk musicians give more weight to aural learning and it is the traditional way of learning tunes, for some the relationship between the ear and the eye is more of a parallel process. Using sheet music more heavily can be useful for a person that comes from a musical background that included reading or if they have trouble transitioning to learning all by ear. For fiddler Chris Madigan, written notation and learning by ear are “really woven together” (Madigan 2019). He uses sheet music to figure out finger numbers and placement on strings after hearing a tune, and as a visual learner he uses notation for memorization. Roger Perrault, a New England fiddler who has been playing for decades, uses sheet music much more heavily now than before due to his memory not being as sharp as it once was. The musicians I encountered that use written notation more than what is typical still emphasized the importance of the ear first. Elaine suggested a ratio of three hours of listening to one hour of playing as ideal! As long
as listening is overall more prevalent than reading, this parallel process is still considered acceptable as a way to learn fiddle tunes.

In addition to sheet music supporting the transmission of tunes is a relatively recent development that has revolutionized folk music today: the use of technology. From the internet to personal recording devices, the resources available in the last ten years have skyrocketed, increasing the accessibility of folk music to musicians literally and figuratively farther than ever before. Existing research as suggested in the literature review discusses recording devices and access to recorded music, but due to the extremely fast-paced development of technology so much has changed in recent years and has impacted folk music transmission. Once folk music was fairly contained to local communities, but now Skype lessons, YouTube, digitization, and other websites allow traditional music to be available to anyone in the world with an internet connection. Due to technology, “People can learn music from so many places in the world, so many different cultures” (Madigan 2019).

Many folk music camps include lists of tunes on their websites with the idea that these tunes will likely be played at camp. That way, musicians attending the camps can learn the tunes ahead of time if they desire. These lists are free and available for anyone to use, not just campgoers, and often the sites have active archive lists from previous years. Other websites offering compilations of tunes that include titles, recordings, video links to YouTube, and keys are also available for general use (Appendix A). With these resources, anyone with basic technical skills on the fiddle can become their own teacher. Discovering and learning new tunes is possible with just a few clicks and a desire to know more.

Along with endorsing the positive aspects of this incredible wealth of information comes a necessary word of caution. While the internet has provided instant access to musicians, its
misuse can cause a lack of cultural context. Technology is an aid, a supplement, not an alternative way of learning folk music. Whether New England musicians live in areas devoid of any traditional music or where it is plentiful, using technology helps maintain a connection to the music, other musicians, and clearly supports learning. However, the priority of a folk musician is to understand their “sense of place in history” within the larger framework of the genre (McNally 2019). Gaining this awareness through an individual’s unique contribution to folk music occurs when interacting with live musicians, which makes attending camps incredibly important, especially for musicians who live in an area with limited folk music outlets.

Besides the internet, personal recording devices are becoming a mainstream part to learning fiddle tunes. Some musicians use advanced audio recorders, but most use a recording app on their smartphone. These recordings are not meant for commercial release or for profit, only for use during individual practice time. Due to the large number of tunes learned in a week at camp or during a two-hour jam, it becomes almost a requirement to use a recording device to preserve tunes for review after the event ends. Recording aids in the compilation of a musician’s mental or written tune bank for long-term use.

Musicians recorded tunes during classes and at jams with the permission of the instructors and facilitators, respectively. Usually the instructor designated a specific time during the camp class for students to take out devices and record. Often the teacher played the tune slowly without embellishment for the explicit purpose of individuals note-checking later when they reviewed the tune’s melody. Sometimes instructors instead or additionally chose to play the tune at their typical performance speed with stylistic elements for the musicians listening to review more complex aspects of the tune at a later time.
Video recording is also a helpful tool. Audio recording is perfectly adequate for recalling melodies and titles, but a visual keepsake is useful for technical aspects of fiddling such as bowing and some ornamentation. While many bowing variations are usually possible within a single tune, instructors at NHMC and my lesson teachers often taught specific bowing patterns that aided natural playability (Figure 3). In addition, having a video to watch later can support the ear learning process. Some musicians find it helpful to watch the finger placement of their teacher to review or learn notes they may have missed during the live teaching of the tune if they are struggling to hear the notes accurately.

Figure 3: Video recording bowing technique during Irish Intermediate Fiddle class at Northeast Heritage Music Camp

Another recent development in technology in folk music transmission is the digitization of music. This advancement has two competing sides of a coin. On one side, digitization of
music increases its availability to listeners and musicians. Uploading a tune recorded on a device to a computer allows for an individual to compile their own database of music and even use features such as slowing it down or editing it for optimal learning. In addition, digital music via streaming allows listeners access to it essentially anywhere they have their device with them. On the other side of the coin, free streaming services like Pandora and Spotify have lessened the need for CD purchases, which is one way that professional folk musicians make a bulk of their profits. Compared to CD sales, musicians receive very little compensation from a streaming audience. An additional downfall to streaming is that a listener does not have easy access to the CD liner that often contains the history and background of a tune, which is an important part of sharing folk music with others. Certainly more investigation into this aspect of folk transmission as digitization and technology continues to evolve is necessary.

Fiddle Technique

Along with the above discussion of learning and sharing tunes I consider fiddle repertoire and its many layers. These aspects contribute to a genre of music that provides room for creativity and inclusivity. Some of these layers are technical elements of fiddling, a discussion on variations, and new trends in the specialization of folk styles.

The fiddle is an instrument that allows for many ‘correct’ ways to play it. Because left hand shifting is rarely needed due to the playability of folk melodies originally for dance music, an arched wrist is not necessary. Some fiddlers cradle the neck of the instrument in their left hand and a variety of thumb positions are possible. During my field experience I saw dozens of different bow holds in the right hand. The bow is considered the part of the instrument that mainly creates musical expression, and various hand grips represent the uniqueness of
individuals’ playing styles. Some musicians hold it in a way reminiscent of classical playing closer to the frog, while others hold the bow above the index finger grip without touching the frog at all. Most fiddlers use a shoulder rest but some do not, and the instrument can be held more in front of the body or over to the left side. The underlying idea with holding the fiddle is that it should be relaxed and not cause any pain. As long as playing the instrument feels “comfortable and natural,” it is accepted and encouraged (John Mowad personal communication 6/20/19).

In the same way that many playing techniques are accepted in the music itself, fiddle playing is all about personal expression. When asked what her favorite thing about fiddle was, Sarah Hotchkiss responded, “The first word that comes to mind is freedom” (Hotchkiss 2019). While she believes a range of creative interpretation is available in classical playing, she thinks fiddle playing offers less conformity than classical. In fact, many folk musicians I interviewed directly but respectfully compared these two genres, praising the benefits of folk music that classical never offered them - creativity, acceptance, and accessibility.

Additionally, a wish that multiple interviewees had was for non-folk musicians to recognize that traditional music has just as much value as classical or other genres of music. An apparent disconnect is present between how folk music actually impacts its participants and what non-folk musicians perceive to be true. As a trained classical musician learning folk music, I can attest that fiddle music does in fact have “expressions every bit as deep . . . and complicated” and “has a tug on your heart just as much as classical music” (Bennet-O’Dea 2019). This music and its cultural practices are deeply rooted and can powerfully affect its participants.
Variations in Fiddle Tunes

Similar to how many bow and fiddle holds are accepted by musicians, tunes offer an infinite number of creative possibilities. In a compilation book of old-time fiddle music lent to me by fiddle teacher John, Miles Krassen argues that a musician can learn the physical skills necessary to play the fiddle well in less than three years. However, the “real problem,” or rather, the delight and challenge is to absorb and understand that part of the music which transcends mechanics: the aspects of fiddling which are a matter of expression and taste. Each particular style encountered is like a new language or, at least, a new dialect. To fiddle well in any style, one has to learn the grammar and syntax of that style: phrasing, bowing patterns, double stopping, ornamentation, acceptable types of variation, etc. Then one has to become so fluent in a particular idiom that all these elements are incorporated into one’s playing effortlessly, without being self-conscious about it (Krassen 1983, 7).

Of course, for a beginner, the grammar and syntax of a fiddle tune only comes after a certain level of comfort with playing basic melodies. Still, the concept can apply to a fiddler over their lifetime. In his comparison of a tune akin to an empty room, Jeff Todd Titon describes adorning and updating the room to suit personal taste. “Over the years, the fiddler changes the setting, improving it a little, making it his or her own. Just as there is no single ‘correct’ way to furnish a room, there is not one right way to play a fiddle tune” (Titon 2001, 2). Variations and stylistic elements are ultimately a result of musicians interacting personally with the music and then sharing their version with others. Folk music is “accessible to change” and can be done in a way that is respectful to the tune’s stylistic origins yet becomes unique to a performer (Malkin 2019).

I experienced the phenomenon of variation within folk music several ways and have provided one example here. One of the first fiddle tunes I learned from John is called The Girl I
Left Behind Me (Figure 4). The Maine Fiddle Camp’s 2019 tune list includes a title called Gal I Left Behind Me (Figure 5). They are clearly the same tune but have stylistic, rhythmic, and melodic differences with an obvious variation in their names. The website includes an mp3 file (played by Maine Fiddle Camp staff member Elaine Malkin) and sheet music for reference but even these two sources are not exactly the same. I also heard this tune performed at MFC jams that combined parts of both interpretations. All of these performances are correct and acceptable interpretations of this simple tune. I have chosen to compare Elaine’s interpretation and the version I was taught from John.

The performances of these tunes on my recording app and the mp3 file are both for educational purposes and could be but are not necessarily exactly representative of how the two musicians would play the tune in a jam or for a dance. Still, the essence of their interpretations is available for comparison for this exercise. Even if these recordings are intended more for teaching the basic notes and rhythms of the tune to intermediate players, those that hear and
replicate it continue the important chain of sharing which is such a crucial part of the folk experience, theoretically adding their own interpretation to it before they reshare it.

Elaine’s playing has a greater forward motion with the pulse more on the emphasis at the front of each beat while John’s rhythms land securely within the tempo. John chooses to give most notes their full value but Elaine includes more lifts and lilts. Besides these stylistic differences, John’s version includes only quarter and eighth notes while Elaine plays syncopated rhythms such as dotted eighth and sixteenth patterns. Note-wise the B sections of each recording are very similar, whereas the A sections begin the same but their ending phrases differ slightly. During my interview with Elaine we did not discuss this particular tune, but she emphasized how folk music’s living tradition is perpetuated in two ways. One, musicians can add to the existing repertoire through composition and two, musicians can change existing tunes “in a way that doesn’t distort the style” (Malkin 2019). Both versions are beautiful, both are valuable to learn, and both are accepted as correct interpretations of this tune.

When a person learns fiddle repertoire Mark shared that “there’s a thread that comes from the past that comes through [them]” (Sustic 2019). This thread of connection provides space for individuals to “take what [they]’ve heard” and make it their own before passing it on to someone else, hence how variations come about (Sustic 2019). Mark even believes that music should not be played the same way and that we should not desire to play it the same exact way as someone else. This process of sharing and modifying repertoire is a direct example of how folk music is a living tradition. Musicians learn from those that came before them, add their personal tastes to tunes which in turn get shared with others in their community, and the process starts over again.

When I attended the slow jam and it was my turn to pick a tune I chose to play The Girl I Left Behind Me. Everyone listened and then played it “my” way, which was based off of John’s
version but was not exactly the same. In fact, the tune was such a success that Sarah requested that the group play it again during a public event called the Buskathon where different folk musicians played on a street in Burlington, Vermont that has heavy foot traffic. I also led this tune during a jam at MFC in probably still a slightly different way than before. Here is a prime example of the sharing process where I not only passed along my interpretation of the tune to a group, but the tune was then shared by this group to many more listeners and performers at other venues.

Specialization of Style

The discussion of fiddle repertoire would be incomplete without considering a trend much larger and impactful than minor variations between interpretations of tunes. This direction is the move towards the specialization, or fragmentation, of folk styles. Anglo-American folk music in New England has always been diverse and varied, drawing its repertoire and stylistic influences mainly from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Canada. The crossovers and origins of tunes is incredibly complex and messy. With the influence of the media and recording technology making music more accessible than ever before, in the last several decades folk music has become even “more of a melting pot than it ever was” (Sutherland 2019). However, folk music has become more specialized with musicians identifying with and gravitating towards one particular region’s style and repertoire instead becoming proficient in multiple styles of traditional music.

The shift from a general focus to more distinct separation between traditions has pros and cons. Some musicians I spoke to supported this direction and others expressed distaste, while some had no strong feelings one way or the other. Regardless of personal opinion, this movement is a current reality that seems likely to extend into the future. I attribute this trend
partially to the insurgence of camps. While camps have kept folk music alive and well in parts of New England, they are essentially a business interaction between musicians who want to gain knowledge and experience in exchange for tuition. A camp’s inherent structure with a daily schedule lends itself to a division of classes by genre and skill level.

Over time in its fourteen-year existence, Northeast Heritage Music Camp has become more refined by gaining a greater number of genre-specific classes as it has grown and as camps have become more of an established standard for folk musicians to attend. John described this camp succinctly as a “smorgasbord” or “chocolate sampler” of styles to choose from (John Mowad, June 20, 2019, personal communication to author). Maine Fiddle Camp’s classes were divided only by skill level, but classes can and did have an emphasis on a particular kind of music. For example, my intermediate class ended up studying Scottish jigs more than any other kind of music. Overall, MFC emphasized more repertoire coming from New England and tunes at jams often had a distinct New England flavor.

One positive aspect of this specialization is a higher standard of musicianship within each style. Some musicians value the depth of studying one particular kind of traditional music. Taking a more general approach can mean “you don’t get to really go deep into one thing and really find out what it means” (Tracey 2019). Discovery and a mature understanding of the music comes with this focused approach. In addition, specialization can lead to a higher standard of playing in that style. While still being an accessible kind of music, interviewees described folk music as having more nuance and sophistication than it once did. This specialization also has led to a much higher degree of proficiency than ever before, with young and old musicians astounding their listeners with expert technique, superb ear learning abilities, and overall a very sophisticated understanding of the music.
Specialization can also be seen as fragmentation. It is a loss of “opportunity to be influenced by voices of other styles” and by people in another tradition (Sustic 2019). Mark Sustic believes that before this trend began, “it was the soup that was interesting,” not the ingredients of specialized playing that are now kept more separate (Sustic 2019). He prefers a more general approach to learning because what makes a tune interesting and memorable comes from these genre crossovers. As a result, perhaps less creative playing and collaboration occurs overall than it once did before this shift.

Becky Tracey offers advice that seems to meet these schools of thought in the middle as a solution for those desiring more or less specialization. She thinks that it can be confusing to try different traditions of playing and that “your body doesn’t even know what to do” (Tracey 2019). Another interviewee said that playing many styles creates “musical mashed potatoes” and inferred that an attempt to do so can lead to a homogenization of styles, losing the unique character of each tradition (Jackson 2019). I experienced this phenomenon at NHMC when I attended classes in three different styles of playing each day - Irish, Cape Breton, and Québécois. I was challenged to keep each way of playing straight in my mind and my fingers, especially considering the high concentration of tunes I was learning in such a short time. However, Becky does not believe a musician should camp out in the same genre forever. Instead, she suggests learning one style really well, but then branching out into other traditions.

Depending on the level of involvement a person has in fiddle playing can help determine their approach to learning and where they fit on this spectrum. For a professional teacher and performer specialization is probably more ideal, whereas a more casual participant might have success in dabbling in a host of styles. Due to the increasingly high number of subgenres within
folk music it can be “difficult to find your bearings” (Sustic 2019). Therefore, each musician must decide for themselves how they can participate and contribute to the thread of folk culture.

**Individual and Collective Impact**

Through various ways, individual identity as well as collective identity greatly contribute to the community and practices of folk culture. The second half of this chapter will highlight aspects of social and personal impacts of participation and how these human factors are integral to shaping folk music in New England as part of its living tradition. First I will examine collective components of folk culture such as folk music’s dance origins, important aspects of folk culture via community and friendship, and mentoring. Secondly, I will analyze individual impact through character growth, self-awareness, and what one person’s contribution to the larger whole of folk music means.

**Social Dance Origins of Tunes**

As previously mentioned, folk music, especially fiddle music, finds its roots in dance. Folk music can be played for many kinds of dance forms, but the most popular one in New England is the contra dance. Many of the stylistic characteristics that have developed in fiddle music are a direct impact of musicians trying to play in a way that causes listeners to want to get up and participate in lively dancing. For example, during my fiddle lessons we greatly focused on bowing and how the tunes become more dance-like with certain patterns. Typically a down bow stroke should line up with the downbeat of a measure. Any slurring in a tune happens
because of this preference to have a downbow during the next downbeat. Down bows are powerful and direct, and can help dancers re-center themselves for the next phrase of movement.

Several interviewees heavily emphasized this relationship between dancing and fiddle playing style. Elaine suggested that certain melodic and rhythmic characteristics of fiddle style is crucial for a successful dance and that the dancers and musicians have nonverbal communication also essential for satisfaction for everyone. She told me

this is a big, important statement. If it’s not danceable, if it isn’t rhythmically steady, and if it doesn’t lift the people - dancers want to be off the floor, you have to lift them off the floor - so if you play heavy, if your rhythm is bad and you slow down and you speed up, they hate it. And so we’re better musicians, those of us who play for dances, because we’re more rhythmically correct and more buoyant and it’s just more fun.”

The communication between musicians and dancers is palpable during a contra dance, and inherently encourages a feeling of community among the group. Dancers feed off the musicality of the musicians, and those playing help direct the flow of energy in the room. Musicians who have this heightened sense of awareness “see and feel how [the dancers are] reacting to what [they are] doing, and that sort of feeding of energy back and forth certainly informs the playing” (Madigan 2019). Rose Jackson, a college student who plays fiddle in a contra dance band part-time, believes all musicians should play for a dance to experience this phenomenon. She said, “I think everyone should play for dancers at some point because I think it really does inform the way that you phrase things and emphasize things, and also sort of the idea of where the beat goes” (Jackson 2019). For those who attend folk music camps, getting an opportunity to play for a dance is an experience many participants were able to have. At NHMC and MFC campers could volunteer to play a set of tunes during a dance even if they had never done it before. Having a thorough understanding of fiddle music as dance music comes as a result of actually playing for a contra dance. While I did not have enough skill at the time of my
attendance at camps to play during a dance, I hope to continue developing my fiddle repertoire and technique in order to do so someday.

Certain New England folk tunes are meant for contra dances, but contra dancing in New England today is “very open to different styles” (Tracey 2019). Dances may have a certain flavor of music or can be more diverse in style depending on the musicians present. During NHMC contra dancing took place every evening with the music played by staff members of all traditions, and one night even featured random groupings of camp musicians who performed. As evidenced here, folk music is “very inclusive, very porous” and “it lets new sounds in” (Sutherland 2019). MFC also had daily dancing that included a variety of styles and geared more towards children but still intended for everyone’s enjoyment and participation. During the Peacham Acoustic Music Festival sessions of contra dancing led by several different dance bands was also an important element to the weekend.

Another level of communication during a contra dance occurs between the dance caller and the musicians. Chris Madigan, a fiddler who also has experience calling for contra dances, explained that certain tunes optimally fit the choreography of a dance. When calling, he might request that the band play a tune for a particular dance but gives the musicians the freedom to pick one that might be similar to the tune he suggested because the overall end result is the same: the melodic figures and driving rhythm of certain tunes should line up with the dance moves and help the dancers perform each part successfully before the tune and choreography repeats.

Chris’s approach to calling dances is to build on each dance throughout the evening. He starts with simple choreography and with each dance increases the difficulty level, with the band matching the intensity and complexity of each dance.
He also shared with me that the caller and musicians must communicate to determine the structure of the evening in terms of tone. While dancers love high-energy tunes paired with complicated and invigorating dances, not every dance can be like this because it would become monotonous and exhausting. Dances are typically at least two hours or more with practically non-stop playing and movement so diversity in mood, tempo, meter, and style is needed to keep the dance feeling fresh, fun, and accessible for everyone. For example, because waltzes are in 3/4 and contra dances are in 4/4 time, often the caller will decide to have a waltz in the middle of the evening and/or at the end of the night to really change up the tone of the event. Or, the musicians will alternate between tunes in major and minor keys to diversify their set. These kinds of variations that lead to a successful night of dancing are a result of successful interaction between caller and musicians.

Even though I attended NHMC camp with a priority to study fiddle music and interact with fiddle players, contra dancing became one of my favorite parts about the week and during my field experience as a whole. I experienced new connections with the people I danced with and forged deeper friendships with those that I met during fiddle classes. Each contra event I attended was unique but each one included pulsing music, laughter, and camaraderie within the group. Even participants that chose not to dance lined the walls of the room to watch, socialize, and snack. As a musician, caller, or a dancer, contra dances reinforce and reflect a sense of community that camp members build throughout the week. As Elaine summarized, “it feels better . . . to play when people are dancing because I’m sharing” (Malkin 2019). Many folk musicians I spoke with lamented the increasing difficulties to make genuine connections with people in our modern world, but that dancing offers an opportunity to do that through the sharing of music.
Despite the love for contra dancing that I and others experience, this aspect of fiddle music ebbs and flows in New England. “There’s pockets around New England where it’s extremely strong and in other pockets where it’s not” (Tracey 2019). Even though the title of folk music sounds like it should be widespread and shared among everyday people, it is actually only known to a small group compared to mainstream society. As I experienced, the community of folk musicians is very inclusive and accepts new members openly, but “the whole thing is pretty below the radar” of society (Sutherland 2019). Perhaps this pastime of community-based music is “slowly fading away” and “people are getting away from the social aspect of dancing” because of distractions in our busy lives (Frazer 2019). Despite peaks and valleys in participation contra dance continues to live on in these pockets of New England. This aspect of folk music is a vital component to the community aspect of the tradition, even for people who focus more on playing.

**Community Through Music-Making**

On a more local and anecdotal scale are the friendships and hospitality that exists within folk music. When I asked interviewees about the community of folk tradition, the overwhelming response was positive. Just about everyone I interacted with shared with me how this community of people has impacted their lives for the better. I heard comments like, “It’s a really open community” (Tracey 2019), “this music is about jumping over the walls” that people have up (Cullinan 2019), and that community is the reason people keep coming back to participate (Scanlon 2019). Katie McNally, an expert in the Cape Breton style of fiddle playing, compared participation in folk music to what a church congregation can offer in terms of community, and
that this music allows for deep connections between people (McNally 2019). She particularly expressed the inclusivity of folk music, no matter the experience level of a person.

Especially during camps but also at jams and the PAM festival, I witnessed and experienced friendships forming and rekindling of old relationships that unfolded throughout the week. This sense of community and acceptance were even evident in the interviews I conducted throughout my field experience. Everyone I approached about directly participating in this research or just in general conversations were sincere, willing to give me their time freely, and expressed genuine interested in what I was doing. Without expecting payment or some kind of direct benefit, the folk musicians I met helped me understand that this sense of community within the genre is visceral. Kerry Cullinan described his experience with Sacred Harp singing, a branch of vocal folk music, by saying, “There are so few things that I can think of that are so universally active in bringing people together as opposed to pushing them apart” besides the act of coming together to make music (Cullinan 2019).

Folk music performance is a very social form of music-making. In fact, human interaction is at the core of this musical culture. Surrounding the music-making process were these above examples of community and collaboration, and even during the music-making process nonverbal communication takes place between participants that contributes to the overall community feel. Becky shared that one of her favorite parts about folk music is that you “can feel alive” when playing with others in jams and that “you’re just caught up in the swell of playing” (Tracey 2019). When reminiscing about fiddle contests that used to be popular in the region, John and Roger highlighted the personal challenge and goal setting that accompanied contest playing. However, John shared that the “real fun was jamming downstairs” after the
The chance to learn from and play with others in a community setting is a priority over the individualistic aspects of folk music.

Camps in particular perpetuate this community emphasis. Maine Fiddle Camp actually started twenty-five years ago because a group of adult folk musicians had a desire to revive teaching and sharing music with their children, similar to how folk music used to be transmitted among family members. The camp was a very small event meant for several families over a long weekend, but it exploded in popularity in the last decade or so due to the increased number of guest teachers, improved accommodations, and through online and word of mouth marketing. Now the camp takes place during one long weekend in June in addition to two entire weeks in August every summer with maxed camper capacity. Due to its popularity I actually was put on the waiting list to attend one of the August camps, but thankfully was accepted and able to attend at the last minute. Katie Newell, who has been a participant and teacher at MFC since it began, described MFC by saying, “We’re trying to reach back to this old sense of community that used to be before industrialization” (Newell 2019).

Even MFC’s location lends itself to a pre-industrial way of life. It took place in rural Maine with no internet access. In fact, all three of the main events I attended during fieldwork (NHMC, MFC, and PAM Fest) had limited access to the outside world and were fairly isolated from more metropolitan areas; NHMC and PAM Fest did not have any cell phone reception and all three locations required at least a fifteen minute drive to the nearest town that had shops and accommodations. Coincident or not, this lack of internet and phone access allowed participants to be more present and engaged with the people around them. Elaine said, “It’s like going back” and that the lack of internet and location helps “recreate the old-time villages” (Malkin 2019).
This microcosm village sentiment reminiscent of the past to learn and share music that happens at MFC and other camps continues to bolster folk music-making as a primarily social affair.

Hospitality is another key element to folk music culture that I experienced in many forms, which is especially poignant due to my outsider status. I participated in a potluck dinner before Sarah and John’s slow jam, and despite not knowing my hosts before attending I was also offered housing at the post-NHMC jam and at the PAM Fest. The NHMC jam was titled the ‘Blueberry Jam’ due to our host’s offer to pick blueberries on her property for free and participants also shared a meal in between playing. I also had the chance to speak with Roger Perrault, a New England fiddler, who opened up his home to me for a personal visit. Almost always, food, drink, and kindness accompanies the music-making experience.

While these examples are anecdotal and not every single person has had all wonderful experiences, for the most part this kind of hospitality does exist in the folk music community and is a major part of why participants are drawn to it. Becky Tracey stressed to me that “People do socially just play tunes together and they do go out dancing and have this joy that I think a lot of [non folk participants] are missing” (Tracey 2019). Because folk music provides a “launching point” between people, a common trust is inferred which makes generosity and hospitality more widespread (McNally 2019).

Some participants think that folk music is merely the backdrop for the space to find community, while for others community comes as a result of playing music together first. Some musicians express equal weight on both the people and the music-making as essential parts of their experience. No matter which view, folk music integrates community and music in a holistic way. It is not possible to have one without the other. Roger describes fiddling as “more than the
sum of its parts” (Perrault 2019). Folk music goes much deeper and has many more components than simply playing notes.

Mentorship and Personal Impact

A final consideration when examining the collective identity of folk musicians is its multigenerational mentoring that goes beyond teaching notes. Pete Sutherland, who performs and teaches folk music in Vermont full-time, considers his role as a mentor as “being available for pretty much any need and any question,” comparing his approach to being a father figure to younger musicians (Sutherland 2019). He also believes it is the responsibility of older musicians to pass on what they know to less experienced players.

One of his protegés Oliver Scanlon, now an adult performer and teacher, shared that his mentoring experience with Pete started with their shared connection of music via fiddle lessons but then extended beyond that. Their friendship continues today as Oliver now mentors the young musicians that he teaches. This example demonstrates the concept of a living tradition and the thread of connection between folk musicians. Maturity and understanding the deep roots of folk music comes with age and experience, and musicians such as Pete and Oliver offer their insight and guidance to instill this awareness in the next generation of fiddlers.

Every person I interviewed expressed some kind of personal growth or impact as a result of their participation in folk music and some even named it as a distinct part of their identity. Even though she only began playing fiddle after retirement, Nancy Remsen knows that it has given her “a piece of confidence” that she did not have previously (Remsen 2019). Others also articulated similar ideas such as self-esteem building and that music is their tool for self-expression. Amidst very challenging personal circumstances, Jeane said that fiddling “gave me a
voice,” and that fiddle is “the most comfortable way of expressing myself” (Bennet-O’Dea 2019). Elaine simply said, “I’m not lonely” (Malkin 2019). While Rose does not believe folk music was transformative for her because it has been a part of her life since childhood, it is firmly imbedded in her identity. Her powerful words to me were, “It’s definitely a big part of, I think . . . just my identity and what feels like my cultural traditions” (Jackson 2019). Katie Newell thinks that fiddling playing is “all part of who I am” (Newell 2019).

**Self-Awareness and an Expanding Worldview**

Being part of the folk community is an opportunity for musicians to broaden their worldview and understanding of others. People who play folk music do not always share commonalities besides the music that they make together. Individuals come from varied backgrounds and socio-economic statuses with differing views on politics, current issues, religion, and more. Sarah said that fiddle music celebrates “different peoples’ way of life” (Hotchkiss 2019). In addition to giving her the opportunity to travel around the world to perform, Katie McNally expressed that folk music has “helped me see different communities of music and just interact with people who are very different from me and live in very different ways from me” (McNally 2019). Being conscious and having appreciation for differences between people is part of what makes the folk community so open and welcoming.

This self-awareness reaches within but also extends beyond a person. As musicians are participating in a somewhat isolated form of music from other more mainstream genres, representing the tradition becomes critical. In addition to playing and sharing tunes, fiddle players have a responsibility to embody the spirit and depth that folk culture offers. Therefore, they have the great task of not only educating each other in folk values but also the general
public. Because folk music is mostly unknown to many people who live in New England, Pete is “resigned to patiently explaining to anybody that this [music] is for life” (Sutherland 2019). He wants to instill in musicians, especially younger fiddlers, that “it’s so important that [they] represent with . . . honoring the tradition” (Sutherland 2019).

John worked to help me understand this consciousness of honoring the past. At each of our lessons, he taught me plenty of fiddle tunes and I learned a significant amount about style, learning by ear, and how to physically play the instrument. But we also spent just as much time, if not more time, discussing the historical trajectory of fiddle playing since the nineteenth century and notable fiddlers in New England and throughout the United States. Knowing we had a limited time together, John emphasized respect and awareness of the past, taking extensive time during lessons devoted to this aspect of my fiddle education. He lent me books, CDs, and recommended websites and individuals to research to ensure my well-roundedness as a novice fiddler.

When I asked Rose what is important to preserve about folk music practices, she emphasized that the stories that accompany tunes are worth knowing. She has always enjoyed reading the liner notes that contain anecdotes and histories of tunes that come with a CD purchase. With the move towards digitization with fewer CDs being made and bought, the sharing of stories may be fading or at least they are being transmitted in a different way, perhaps only in live settings like in camp classes. Others share this emphasis on the stories that accompany the music. Katie Newell shared that “one of the cool things about this music is learning where is it from, who made the tune, where did they live . . . how did this tune come about?” (Newell 2019). In particular, if a tune has an unusual title she enjoys learning the background of it to add to her understanding of its cultural context.
Not only is the original history of the tune worth knowing, but how the person who is sharing the tune learned it is also important. “Tune histories, particularly with rare tunes, are interwoven with the histories of how they came down to the fiddler” (Titon 12). I often heard fiddlers introduce a tune by sharing what country it originates from and what kind of dance it is meant for but then also include who they learned it from in their overview. This layered appreciation for personal and general history of a tune is another way folk music exists as a genre infused within a living tradition where the past and present continue to meet and become something new.

The understanding of the past helps shape the current reality of folk music and will impact its future practices. For example, John recognized that folk culture has changed from what it once was. “What tradition is now is . . . it’s a whole lot of things, but it’s not . . . th[e] definition of a culture of music and music passed on through oral tradition within a community” anymore (John Mowad, July 16, 2019, personal communication to author). Instead, a living tradition exists through jams, camps, lessons, and people like John who teach through a historical lens. Folk music is not just about coming together to play tunes, but it is also about representing the history of musicians that came before now through playing in public venues and through conversations.

This representation might take the form of busking in public. Sarah and John work with the Violin Shop in Burlington, Vermont to host several Buskathons on the city’s busiest street in the summer. They “invite musicians of all levels who would like to come play a tune or two, possibly jam with whoever is present if the mix is right” to raise money for a music scholarship funds within their organization called The Woodbury Strings (Sarah Hotchkiss, 2019, email message to author). While busking, musicians have a responsibility to answer questions of
passerby and also to perform in the same way that they would at a folk music setting. Educating the public can also happen in organic conversations with family or friends when the topic of folk music comes up. Just like I am aiming to correctly depict this musical cultural through my research, so are folk musicians who interact with their non-folk family and friends.

**Boundaries**

Another aspect of self-awareness is recognizing, or at least considering, the boundaries of the genre. At NHMC, certain days included a special midday discussion called Round-Up in between classes, where various topics related to folk music were discussed. One afternoon, the discussion was about the name Northeast Heritage, the history of the camp, and the direction it is moving in. Regarding its name, people discussed how the title NHMC offers limits or exclusions depending on how an individual groups the words, and participants at the meeting appreciated this open interpretation. It can refer to traditional music from the northeast region (*Northeast Heritage Music Camp*) or traditional music that is performed at a location in the northeast (*Northeast Heritage Music Camp*). Even from its title, camp participants can decide where their personal boundaries for the definition of folk music lie.

Facilitator Carol Dickson, a member of the board of directors, voiced the possibility of expanding what class types are offered as a way to “revisit our identity” (Carol Dickson, June 27, 2019, personal communication). She “like[s] the idea of broadening who we are,” but she also doesn’t “want to lose who we are, our identity” in doing so (Carol Dickson, June 27, 2019, personal communication). Some musicians at the Round Up presented various ideas for including more kinds of music while others thought the current offerings were already too numerous to participate in. Despite the differences of opinion, the group commended the
progressive approach to planning the camp and the fact that the board wanted feedback from
camp participants to help shape future years. The discussion ended without a definite decision
regarding more or less future inclusivity, but the fact that this conversation even took place
proves a heightened level of awareness that these musicians have about what is and what should
be included in their folk practices.

I asked interviewees what they wished more people knew about folk music— that is,
people that are not currently involved in folk culture. In their answers some participants
expressed a desire for the general public to know the boundaries in the genre by describing what
folk music is not. They shared that traditional folk music is not just bluegrass and it is not just
commercial singer/songwriter music, but these things can be included in it. Being incredibly
inclusive of many genres of traditional music-making, folk music’s boundaries are actually an
indication of its depth. Vital components of folk music in New England are that it is community-
based, celebrates accessible music that is rooted in history, and is made up of individuals who
shape its current and future practices. But beyond this definition, folk music appears to be very
broad and finds its place in many types of music, a fact musicians seem to be aware of.

Individual impact of folk music is also prevalent in recognizing how one person
contributes to the whole group. The community of folk musicians is made up of individual
stories, ideas, and contributions, and each person decides what their level of involvement is in
this living tradition. Sarah told me that “Folk music, fiddle music should be accessible and that
you can make it whatever you want to make it,” whether this means playing the same three tunes
on the fiddle a few times a year or becoming a master in one style (Hotchkiss 2019). Individuals
contribute to the actual performance and interpretations of tunes, including variations that
become the standard, as well as the process of music-making through teaching, mentoring, and sharing tunes. These individual expressions then make up what folk music is today.

Katie McNally recognizes that when she plays, it is not just her voice that is heard through her fiddle. Instead, her playing includes the voices of all the mentors and teachers she has had throughout her musical experience. Maintaining this kind of mindset towards folk music is crucially important to Mark Sustic. He emphasized that folk music does not belong preserved in a museum, but that it is a “living, breathing, growing enterprise” that has a long future (Sustic 2019). To him, it is not the actual notes or even songs that are important to remember one way forever. Instead he wants to folk culture to retain its current *approach* towards community music-making. The thread of connection between individuals that impacts folk music culture continues to grow longer and stronger as musicians decide how their contributions fit into the whole.

This chapter summarizes my field work research findings during my study of folk music in New England with an emphasis on fiddle. Through attendance at folk music camps and an acoustic festival, fiddle lessons, jams, and interviews with musicians I derive that this music is experienced by relatively few participants but that its impacts are great on personal and collective identity. Folk music is a living tradition that is rooted in the past and is influenced by musicians that shape its future. The accessibility of folk music is a key feature and allows for inclusive music-making encompassing many styles of music. Through examination of the music and its practices of transmission as well as the community of folk musicians on a collective and individual level I conclude that folk music in New England is holistic and relevant in the lives of those that participate in it.
Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This research through a narrative method and learner participation of fiddle provided a small window of understanding into the complex culture of folk music in New England. During eight weeks of fieldwork primarily in Vermont as well as Maine I attended camps, took lessons, played at jams and other events, and formally interviewed eighteen musicians. I observed performance practices, attended an acoustic festival, informally interacted with musicians, and participated as much as was possible as a beginner fiddler. I attempted to uncover what traditional music exists in the region and why people continue to participate in it. My original research questions asked, “Why is folk music important to musicians, how does it impact their lives, and how do they in turn influence the music itself and its cultural practices?” The answers lie in the individual stories and experiences that make up a people-first musical culture centered around participatory music-making.

As a result of my field experience I discovered that folk music endures within a living tradition that is accessible through its playability and inclusive community. Katie Newell summarized it by sharing with me that folk musicians are passing it on just like our grandfathers passed it on to us, it’s been passed on and it’s actually evolving with time because it’s not like a museum thing, we’re not trying to preserve something that was exactly the same as it was 100 years but we respect that, because you have to have respect for the past and where the tunes came from (Newell 2019).

Folk music’s impact is found on an individual level as well as within the larger group and the emphasis on awareness rooted in history is embedded within all aspects of folk performance. This chapter summarizes important takeaways from my research and includes comments for future participation and study in this musical culture, including recommendations for current folk
musicians, other researchers, and music educators. In addition, I end with remarks about how this research impacted me personally.

This research proves that folk music does exist in New England and that it is incredibly meaningful to the people that play it. While it may only continue in pockets that ebb and flow and not much published research exists about folk music after 1970, it is an important way of life for those that participate in it. While some previous research indicated thriving areas of folk music, I still had to experience this truth for myself. When I was in the early stages of my research I actually had decided to study two forms of music, fiddling as well as Sacred Harp singing. I did this because I was unsure if I could find enough participants and events in the area from just one form of traditional music. However, as I got farther along in my field experience, I realized that both these folk music subgenres deserved separate attention because so much information exists on each. I chose to focus more on instrumental folk music and recommend study in the area of Sacred Harp to other researchers. Folk music in New England is thriving in areas and is worthy of much more attention by others.

Most importantly, folk music is important to participants because it is rooted in social creation and enjoyment. Essentially, the spirit of this genre only truly exists when music is made and shared with friends. From lessons to camps, jams, dancing, and busking, all aspects of folk music are centered around celebrating and understanding one another. Whether a person grew up in a family that played folk music, they began learning an instrument after retiring, or they got involved with playing anytime during their life, each individual finds connection through this community of musicians. Some view the music as a vehicle for making connections, while others see the social aspect as a priority while also sharing and learning music. No matter the perspective, folk music impacts people in how they spend their time, who their relationships are
with, and through personal growth and fulfillment as a result of participating in this rich musical culture. Through its living tradition and fluid performance practices, New England folk musicians continue to shape the cultural norms and the music itself through composition, musical interpretation and variations, and the insurgence of events like weeklong folk music camps.

Not only should ethnomusicologists more deeply investigate the folk musical culture of this region, but classical musicians and the general public should as well. The foundation of fiddling and other kinds of folk music is that “it’s peoples’ music” and assumes the principle that “everybody comes from somewhere” (Bennet-O’Dea 2019 and Sustic 2019). Folk music is worth pursuing by people who desire to understand their role within a larger scope and who enjoy expressing themselves through music. Folk music is not just for the elite, but anyone can find a way to participate in it that suits their lifestyle, socio-economic status, and location. Participation in folk music does not require expensive schooling or a background in music and does not usually mean mastery at a professional level. Anyone is encouraged and accepted as an amateur fiddler and the only real requirement is the desire to learn.

This research also presents an overview of the core tenets of fiddling. In other words, what can a beginner as an outsider expect when they enter into the folk community? First, they can expect to be accepted by musicians with openness and without judgment of lack of skill level. Second, they will enter into a holistic activity that combines emotional, mental, and physical elements in the music itself as well as with the people playing it. Third, they will learn tunes that challenge the brain aural learning and gain an appreciation and understanding for music in new ways. Fourth, a beginner can expect to have a heightened sense of self-awareness of their contribution to the larger group and their sense of place in folk music’s living history.
Recommendations for Current Folk Musicians

When considering the future I offer recommendations to current folk musicians as well as researchers who desire to more deeply study traditional genres in New England. Due to the accessibility of folk music through technology, camps, and instructors, its practices are undeniably evolving. As these changes continue to impact the music and its participants, I offer several considerations in an effort to help preserve the approach to music making being rooted in history. Most importantly, I encourage musicians to maintain a cultural context in their participation and respect those that came before them. While recordings and websites like YouTube are incredibly useful tools for learning, they should not replace the primary form of sharing music: live interactions with other musicians. Jamming, tune swapping, lessons, festivals, and camps are opportunities to witness and absorb musicianship from more experienced players and develop a sense of community and belonging. These experiences cannot be replaced by learning in isolation, as real interactions offer a richer and more meaningful way to understand and play this music with others.

Another suggestion is for the continued existence and advocacy of lesson teachers such as Sarah and John to family and friends. Since fewer and fewer people are born into families of musicians and grow up experiencing traditional music, private teachers are one of the main avenues for entry into folk playing. Their value cannot be expressed enough. Their teaching guides students of all ages to develop a love for this music and equips them with the physical skills they need for proficiency. As a public school music teacher, I plan and encourage others to recommend students to Sarah and John as well as investigate how to partner with Young Tradition Vermont, an organization that focuses on teaching folk music to children and youth.
A final recommendation is for musicians to be well-rounded in their musicianship. As folk music moves more towards the specialization of styles, I maintain that while a musician can focus on one style deeply they should still seek to broaden their skillset. This pursuit could take the form of attending jams that encourage all kinds of tunes from different traditions or it might mean seeking expertise in a second style once a first has been learned deeply. Participation in folk music today needs active planning and engagement for its success and maintenance of tradition.

**Recommendations for Future Researchers**

For other researchers interested in this area, plenty of options exist for further study. I also recommend spending as much time as possible in the field, at least eight weeks or more, and to consider doing research during the summer months when camps are most frequent. I recommend choosing one folk instrument or musical style to study deeply or focusing on one aspect about folk music that I was not able to study intensely. Technology and media is one such area. Do recording devices change the way performers learn music and affect the way instructors teach? Do they inhibit or encourage creativity of personal style, and have people lost ear training skills as a result of their assurance to go back and listen whenever they need? To what extent has YouTube affected folk practices and the music sharing process?

Other areas of potential research are on specialization of style, the possible gap that exists between older and newer generations of musicians, camp culture, Sacred Harp singing and other vocal genres, the relationship between folk dance and music, the origins and variations of tunes by location, the study of traditional dance forms in New England, and folk music programs now
being offered at some universities and colleges as well as what folk music is happening in primary and secondary schools. This thesis has attempted to uncover the tip of the iceberg of the current world of traditional music-making in New England, but much more can still be uncovered and celebrated.

**Recommendations for Music Educators**

The result of this work will help continue to bridge the gap between ethnomusicology and music education. For music teachers like myself, I recommend considering adding a folk music component to any general music curriculum. More than one interviewee was introduced to the genre through a music teacher or a guest artist that visited their school when they were a child so clearly this form of advocacy has merit. An ideal place to start is through partnership through an organization or group like Young Tradition Vermont as well as through folk dance.

I plan to teach folk music, instruments, and concepts to students at a Vermont public school where I teach K-8 music with the anticipation that doing so will excite younger generations of residents to participate in these genres, synthesizing my music education expertise and ethnomusicology studies. In addition, sharing these goals with other local New England teachers for a wider impact is important. At the time of writing this thesis, I have received a grant as a result of an innovative proposal to create a partnership between my school and Young Tradition Vermont to begin this process.

For educators with limited funding for new curriculum, folk dance is an accessible, inexpensive, and engaging way to teach children about traditional music. I personally have taught units on folk dance to students in kindergarten through eighth grade using Peter and Mary
Amidon’s *New England Dancing Masters* curriculum as a guide. Their compilation offers clear directions, videos, and audio recordings that allow for accessible learning of all ages.

The folk dance unit I teach is one of the most popular over the course of the year, with students asking to revisit particular dances frequently. In addition to mastering the dances and learning musical concepts, my students experienced their own form of community within the music room. Through collaboration with their peers, physical movement, and perseverance during these dances they began to develop a sense of belonging and purpose. I hope to expand this taste of traditional music through the Young Tradition Vermont partnership and using the cultural context and information I have learned through this research to make it even more relevant and interesting to my students.

**Final Thoughts**

I reported my findings with the folk musicians who participated in my research through a Power Point presentation sent by email. I aimed to summarize my thesis into something accessible that people took time to read and reflect upon. “Making the effort to transform the results so that they are readily understood and potentially usable across a broad spectrum of community audiences . . . facilitates the development of empowerment” (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 255). While I cannot monetarily thank all the participants, I at least gave them a summary of the research so they saw how valuable their insight was for its completion. While different from member checking, this exchange of information further confirmed the authenticity of my conclusions because it was received positively by the audience.
More than anything, I hope that my research serves others by celebrating the unique aspects about Vermont folk culture and the people involved in it. Within academic and local communities, I wish to share their stories and support current folk music practices while broadening my own perspectives about the pockets of folk culture that exist where I live. While ethnographic research probably never feels “done,” as there is always more to learn and explore, I hope this entire project is completed thoroughly and accurately representative of this music. Not only do I hope for completed work, I hope that my research is meaningful in the realm of ethnomusicology and for personal fulfillment along this journey.

In addition to impacting my career as a music educator, my participation in this research has extended beyond academia and has become personal, which is a direct example of how folk music can impact people. I have developed the desire to continue participating in this music for myself and hopefully for my children someday. While my Western music upbringing has immense value and has shaped me into the person I am today, the skills and music I learned during my field experience have resonated with me in a way that classical musicianship never had before. To me, fiddle music equals joy, a sense of belonging and acceptance, and freedom of expression. The people I have met and performed with have left their marks on my heart and in my playing. I plan to keep playing the fiddle and keep searching for understanding of the tunes and how I can contribute to a future of folk music that is alive and well but also rooted in history.
Appendix A: New England Tune List Websites


Appendix B: Consent Form

Vermont Identity Through Fiddle and Shape Note Music
Monica Littlefield
Liberty University
School of Music - Ethnomusicology

You are invited to be in a research study about fiddle music and shape note singing in Vermont. You were selected as a possible participant because of your participation in a folk music event as a performer and/or audience member or you are a fiddle instructor. In addition, you are 18 years of age or older. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Monica Littlefield, a graduate student in the Ethnomusicology Department at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to discover how folk music creates and reflects the identity of Vermont musicians and audience members. Other topics related to identity that will be investigated are history, advocacy, and preservation. Data will be collected through weekly fiddle lessons, attendance and observation at fiddle and shape note performances, and interactions (interviews and informal conversations) with performers and audience members.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Partake in an interview (approximately 30 minutes to one hour) with audio recording.
2. Be photographed, audio recorded, or videotaped during the performance or lesson today.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include an increased awareness of current New England folk music practices and a greater sense of connection to their state of residence.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject if desired by the participant. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

- I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Participants will be assigned a unique number to protect privacy, unless they would like to be directly named in publication.
● Data will be stored on a password locked computer or passcode locked cell phone and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic and written records will be deleted.

● Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from group photographs or group recordings, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Group photos or group recordings will not be destroyed, but your specific contributions and/or pictures will be excluded from the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Monica Littlefield. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at 757-469-5337 or monica.d.littlefield@gmail.com. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty chair, Katherine Morehouse, at khmorehouse@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio record, video record, or photograph me as part of my participation in this study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to use my name in her publication.

☐ The researcher does NOT have my permission to use my name in her publication, please use a pseudonym.

________________________________________________________
Signature of Participant Date

________________________________________________________
Signature of Investigator Date
Appendix C
Directory of Folk Music Events and Resources in New England

Boston Harbor Scottish Fiddle School on Thompson Island, MA
  • https://www.scottishfiddleschool.org

Maine Fiddle Camp in Liberty, ME
  • https://www.mainefiddlecamp.org

Northeast Heritage Music Camp in Starksboro, VT
  • http://www.northeastheritagemusiccamp.com

Old Time on the Onion Fiddle Reunion in Marshfield, VT
  • https://summitschool.wixsite.com/summitschool/old-time-on-the-onion-1

Peacham Acoustic Music Festival in Peacham, VT
  • http://www.pamfest.com

Queens City Contra Dancing in Burlington, VT
  • http://queencitycontras.org

Woodbury Strings (Sarah Hotchkiss and John Mowad, private teachers) in Winooski, VT
  • http://woodburystrings.com

Young Tradition Vermont
  • https://youngtraditionvermont.org
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September 30, 2018.


