Finding the Groove

by Pamela Goddard

There's something hot happening in traditional American dance music. Musicians are crossing musical boundaries, experimenting, improvising and finding a new groove. Central New York has become a crossroads for very strong northern and southern fiddle-based music. Two bands, Big Table and the Groovemongers, have found dramatic ways to fuse these musical traditions.

This past November, Ithaca, New York hosted its first "Day of Dance." Patterned on similar events in New Hampshire, two regional bands presented nine hours of contra dance. The two bands have quite different sounds, but a similar energy. While the Groovemongers lean more towards the northern repertoire, Big Table has a southern bent. Both find a unique sound out of an urge to experiment, to think out of the box. And both put a lot of energy into "the groove."

I found myself wondering how it was that this region has become the cradle for such innovative bands. Locally, we identify ourselves in Ithaca as being "centrally isolated"; Rochester is near the far end of New York, deep in the "lake effect" snow belt. Both Rochester's Groovemongers and Big Table, partly based in Ithaca, are in much demand for dance weekends across the country.

Judy Hyman and Jeff Claus, founding members of Big Table, have played music for contras and squares in central New York for nearly twenty-five years, beginning with a band first known as the Tompkins County Horseflies. Judy tells me, "There's been a big interest in southern style music in this area, all the way up to Rochester. There's been the Henrie Brothers, the Highwoods, Swamp Root, the Correctones, Bubba George, the whole scene." She sees many reasons for this. Part of it was the back to the land movement which took hold in this area in the 1970s. "There's a rough and ready aesthetic that takes to that sound."

Hyman has a compelling theory of geography in music. "If we didn't live in this place, it couldn't happen." Central New York is geographically and culturally in between strong northern and southern music traditions. There are not only musical traditions to bridge, but geographic distances as well. The fact that our region is just six hours away from the mountains of either West Virginia or Vermont may be the missing link. Rapid transport via the interstate highways makes it easy to get to where the music is. Musical cross pollination, if you will.

Even when central New York musicians play southern tunes, there's a regional mark to it. They can t escape being so close to Quebec and New England. "When we play down in Galax, people notice it," Judy says. "It's a little different up here. A different approach to the groove. More of a rock and roll thing could float in there." A friend who recently moved from Ithaca to Atlanta has noticed a similar thing about musicians down there. "When they play northern tunes, it's not really northern. They 'southernify' it, somehow."

I asked the musicians in these two bands how the bands came together. The road to building musical relationships has as many twists and turns as the people involved. Some bands, such as Big Table, seem made for each other from the start. Others have to persist until it works.

"Our first time playing together was ugly," says keyboard player Jane Knoeck of the Groovemongers. The band's mandolin player, CW Abbott agrees. "The first rehearsals were abysmal. We respected each other's abilities, but didn't know what to do with each other's music." They'd played in different bands for years and were looking for something new. "We were all playing dance music, but it was so different," Abbott says. The group's fiddler, Rebecca McCallum adds, "CW's music was very southern. He played a lot of old time and jug band music. We try to do some of both, but have more success with northern tunes."

"We had to throw out preconceived notions," Knoeck tells me. They went about that in a somewhat

systematic way. “From the start we definitely wanted percussion,” McCallum says, “and so added a non-contra groove.” Their main percussionist, Teilhard Frost from Toronto, uses a global knowledge of rhythms: French-Canadian, Latin, Mideastern and more. The band pushed their experimentation while making their first recording. “We literally took everything apart. It made the group think about musical influences and what we do,” says Knoeck.

This has carried on into the music they play for dances. Rebecca McCallum explained, “Both Jane and I are dancers as well as musicians. We’re really concerned about how it will work for the dance.” But there’s still room for improvisation. “We have some arrangements, but Jane and CW will try things out while we’re playing for a dance,” says McCallum. CW Abbott responds, “Sometimes there are dramatic changes in atmosphere. If it falls on its face, at least we tried.”

With one lead instrument and three rhythm players the beat is where it’s at for the Groovemongers. “It started coming together when we found the rhythmic hooks,” says Abbott. McCallum tells me, “We tend to play the melody straight and get experimental with the rhythm.” “With the Groovemongers everyone has the opportunity to improvise all the time,” says Abbot. This is the most fun, creative music I’ve played.”

The members of Big Table found each other on the contra dance event circuit. “An organizer will often hire a southern band, a northern band, and a swing or Cajun band,” says Judy Hyman of Big Table. Core members of the band tell me the same story. While playing at a dance camp, the Horseflies and Nightingale started jamming together and found something that clicked. “Jeremiah was sitting in with the Horseflies, and it seemed to enhance what we were going for,” says Jeff Claus. “A bigger pulse and wheezing drone. We each felt it.” “It reached a point when we said, we need to do this again sometime,” Hyman says. Some time later, Jeremiah McLane invited Claus, Hyman and guitarist Larry Unger to his home in Vermont. “Instantly we made great music,” says McLane.

McLane says that there was an awareness that they were creating something new. “It’s a great combination of strong southern and northern traditions. Each person in the band bridges both.” The combination of musical influences gives Big Table its special sound. In Claus’s opinion, Big Table “brings the power of southern music — that northern music can lack — to the broad shouldered sound of French-Canadian and Irish music.”

Members of Big Table talk about the rhythm holding things down while the fiddle and accordion play around on top. “For me, it’s all about rhythm and drone,” says Jeff Claus. French-Canadian music really resonates with him: “It has a really powerful rhythm. A more up and down back beat pulse. Southern is more forward rolling.” Jeremiah McLane describes how the uke, guitar and bass of Claus, Ungar and June Drucker lay down a groove, while Judy does “what she does, playing the tune and improvising.” He tries to breathe and blend with what the fiddle’s doing, following “like hound and hare.”

It’s an innovation to have the accordion and fiddle blend in southern music, but, according to Jeremiah, not completely unknown. He maintains that the accordion had a place in traditional old time music. “Bill Monroe’s wife played the piano accordion,” he says, and remembers a Jack Benny television show that had an old time band with accordion. Jeremiah goes back to those roots, borrowing at times from what pre-1970s harmonica players did.

What do these musicians get out of playing for an extended event? Well, there’s the chance to hear what other folks are doing. Jeff Claus tells me he loves going to events and being in the presence of other musicians. “It’s great to hear different people do a range of interesting stuff on fiddle-based music, music based on dance.”

“It’s very free,” says Hyman. “You get to play things for long enough to really develop them.” Claus also enjoys being able to play “unfettered, going deeper and deeper into a tune. You play for a really long time. There’s complete license to do things for fifteen minutes or more at a shot.” As compared to five minutes or so in a concert setting.

These musicians tell me about the great feeling of looking out at a room full of people moving and reacting to what they’re doing musically. “There’s mutual support. We need each other,” says McLane.

“Feeling connected to the rhythm of the dancers is really kind of a rush. It’s different with different bands. With Big Table, it’s like getting carried along like a train.” For McCallum: “Playing for dances is my absolute favorite thing. Any kind of dance. I also play for Greek dance. There’s instantaneous feedback watching people’s bodies move.”

And there’s the opportunity to get to know people better. Over the course of several days the dancers and musicians get more connected with each other. Jane Knoeck tells of an Austin weekend where the band had a fireside chat: “There were forty or so people in there talking about how the band got together, what happens in ‘improv land’. It was just a charge to get to know each other, share background, musical roots, all that stuff.” McLane has seen a progression in musical awareness. “People are drawn into it for social reasons or love of dance. But over time they learn more about music. They start listening and a light bulb goes on. They see and hear what we’re doing.”

With all the possible musical traditions available to players in our region, how does a band come up with its particular sound? Each of these bands are made up of diverse elements. There are southern, New England, French-Canadian and rock and roll elements. Members of the Groovemongers have played everything from English country dance music to Greek, Balkan and jug band music. Although members of neither Big Table or the Groovemongers talked about it directly, after listening to their music, it seems that the sound of each band is rooted at least in part in the most familiar territory of their fiddlers.

In many ways, Judy Hyman is right. If these musicians didn’t live in this place, there might not have been the development of this new groove. Central/western New York is a perfect musical meeting ground. Culturally, we’re not exactly east. Residents of the old New England states call us midwesterners, while the pioneers who settled to the west treat us as Yankees. Travel out this way and you’ll begin to hear a midwestern flattening in people’s speech cadence. But we’re not western either. On the edge of the Appalachian range, we’re not exactly north or south. We’re at a crossroads. The Groovemongers and Big Table have bridged new musical territory for contra dance.

This article began as a piece in the Arts and Entertainment section of the Ithaca Times (November 7-13, 2001). The author says “...there was so much more that the musicians shared with me which I wasn’t able to fit into [the paper’s] space and format. I really think the perspective of musicians, regrading how they form a band, put their sound together and why they enjoy playing for dances deserves a larger audience than the local paper could provide.”

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