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Collecting Tunes: My Musical Passport

Our world is filled with tunes. A tune is a melody, one that's short, singable, and memorable. Often, it encapsulates a single emotion or idea, a vignette of a particular time or place.

We all collect tunes. We absorb the popular songs and stories of our day, we store them in our memories and we share them with others. The archetypal, Homeric image of the wandering bard rings true in all of us to some degree. It would be quite the challenge to find a person who has never been so moved by a musical phrase that they sing it to themselves again and again, over and over.

I collect books filled with tunes. My collection of tune books encompasses the melodies of New England, Ireland, Bretagne (Brittany) and Appalachia, as well as tunes from specific musical traditions, such as bluegrass and jazz. My collection includes over twenty volumes; some titles that have been hardly touched, others with missing covers and frayed corners, each with its special place on my shelf.

I remember what a revelation the concept of a tune book was for me as a young musician. The summer after seventh grade, my best friend and I went to Maine Jazz Camp. Although we were young musicians, we'd spent hours enjoying classic CDs, including *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis. "Freddie Freeloader" was a favorite track: slow and cool, featuring a tight rhythm section with sizzling solos and a long, winding melody.

On the first day of camp, after setting up our bunks, we ran downstairs, pulled by the sounds of saxophones and drums. In the basement, the older campers were playing “Freddie Freeloader.”

We were astounded. What were these kids doing playing a song from our favorite album? We couldn’t fathom how they had learned it. When we asked, the older kids would only tell us one intriguing phrase: *The Real Book*. Clueless, we looked at each other. What is a real book? Who wrote it? Where can we find one?

We found out soon enough that all the kids had their own copy. *The Real Book* is a collection of jazz standards, tunes written by the great swing and bebop composers of the mid-20th Century. (When it was first published, it was an answer to the “fake book,” a haphazard volume of jazz standards where each copyrighted tune was reproduced without permission. Hence, *The Real Book*.) Its pages catalog hundreds of tunes, a physical representation of the jazz world’s collective musical knowledge. My friend and I each bought a copy of *The Real Book* and began to pore through it. “There’s that song from that Thelonious Monk album!” “Look, there’s the chart for ‘Oleo!’” “Take a look at the rhythm for the intro to this tune!” For the first time, melodies to which we’d been listening for years were at our fingertips.

The Real Book: Vol. 1 in bass clef was my first book of tunes. Today, I own the Sixth Edition of Volume One, and two copies of Volume Two in different keys. I also have Volumes One, Two, and Three of the Fifth Edition, which feature more obscure tunes and a different style of notation, and was compiled and published in 1988. Each *Real Book* features a thick pastel-colored cover and a plasticized rigid black binding. In addition to my volumes of *The Real Book*, I also have three editions of *The New Real*

Book, which include over a thousand contemporary jazz standards. I have copies of *The Jazz Fakebook*, *Jazz LTD*, *The Library of Musicians' Jazz*, *The Book*, and *The Colorado Cookbook*. These books are each comprehensive anthologies of the standards any jazz musician might want to play.

My first *Real Book*, now tattered and missing many pages, has been with me since that summer after seventh grade. To this day, every time I open it I learn something new. Across the cover in black sharpie marker is the signature of Victor Wooten, my favorite bass player and first musical hero. *The Real Book* was my first drink from music's infinite well, and each additional book has increased my appreciation for the prolific artists whose compositions fill the pages.

Not everyone feels this way about using books like *The Real Book*. Soon after I picked up my first copy of the book, other older musicians criticized me for it. There is a strong stigma against using written music for playing jazz standards. It strikes people in the jazz world as inauthentic, lacking in creativity, and insensitive to the importance of the onstage evolution of each individual tune. In fact, one of the first pieces of advice that I received from a teacher that same summer at Maine Jazz Camp was to throw my *Real Book* in the trash. Books like *The Real Book*, my teachers said, should stay in the backpack, the instrument case, or the practice room, never to be seen on stage. They were for reference only, not practical for performance purposes, and *definitely* not cool.

In some respect, my teachers were right. While tunes may be poetic, their purpose is to be played and interpreted, not merely read. In many styles of folk music, tunes are played and never recorded on paper, especially in traditions like Celtic dance music.

This past summer I spent a month in Ireland. I traveled across the country alone, with my bass, my mandolin, and a backpack filled with clothes and books. In mid-July I spent a week in Miltown Malbay for a festival of traditional Irish music. I had gone to Ireland to increase my knowledge of Irish dance tunes. Miltown is a quiet village on the Western coast of County Clare, and during festival week, there's live music drifting out of every window of each of the fourteen pubs lining the town's single street.

As in jazz, people in the traditional Irish music scene have an extensive shared knowledge of tunes. Irish tunes fall into a fairly regimented system of organization, based on various dances: Reels and jigs for faster dances in various time signatures; waltzes and hornpipes for medium tempo tunes; airs for the slowest tunes. There are easily hundreds, if not thousands, of tunes for each style of dance. The realm of Irish tunes is vast.

Something struck me when I asked traditional musicians in Miltown how they had learned their tunes. The most common answer was that they had never consulted books. Often, the name or specific features of a tune would escape them, but once the music started, they could jump right in to the session and play along. Traditional folk musicians are walking encyclopedias. Many have never seen a tune book, and usually only consult books when trying to rediscover old and forgotten tunes.

There is one book that holds many of the tunes that one might hear at a traditional Irish session, a relatively contemporary volume in the scope of Irish music history. Captain Francis O'Neill, born 1848 in County Cork, Ireland, immigrated to America and was a police chief in Chicago in the early 1900s. Many of the men on his squad were Irish musicians, and O'Neill, a piper himself, compiled the tunes played by his coworkers. The book, titled *O'Neill's Music of Ireland*, includes over a thousand

melodies, and is referred to as “The Book” by Irish musicians. I picked up my copy of O’Neill’s book while in Miltown. It’s a fantastic volume, with literally over a thousand tunes, each labeled in English and Gaelic with beautiful, delicate script.

Collecting tunes is a funny business. At times, flipping the pages of my collection makes me feel like a statistician or analyst. O’Neill’s book is tall and thin, with sometimes eight or nine tunes per page, the notes squeezed and copied so tightly that the dots and staves begin to blur together. There are certain thrills, such as when the same tune has been transcribed differently in two different volumes. But at times, tunes appear sterile and meaningless on the page, quiet and two-dimensional, seeming so cryptic outside of musical context. At times, I question my motives for collecting these books.

One of history’s most renowned tune collectors is Béla Bartók. He traveled across the world, through regions like the Balkans that have a rich history of folk music. He gathered field recordings and transcriptions of traditional tunes played by native performers. He recorded and wrote down the tunes to inform his compositions. Aaron Copland did similar work, the prime example being his *Appalachian Spring*: The ballet utilizes modern techniques of arranging and composing while simultaneously setting a traditional Shaker tune, “A Gift To Be Simple.” He found the tune in a book of Shaker folk songs.

It was during my first summer at Maine Fiddle Camp, not Maine Jazz Camp, that I became interested in collecting tune books. MFC is a place where musicians of all ages and all skill levels come together to share melodies from various folk traditions, from Québécois and Irish to New England and Appalachian, as well as modern tunes inspired by these traditional roots. While there are experts in these traditions who attend the camp,

most people assemble to learn tunes from each other, to swap melodies the way friends swap stories. Whether someone learned the tune from an old book, wrote a tune on their own, or learned it personally from one of the tradition's greats, the important thing is that the tune gets played and that people learn it.

Being at MFC showed me how exciting it can be to learn new tunes. I began collecting tune books in earnest, building up my collection with smaller books like *The New England Fiddler's Repertoire*, a red and white spiral-bound book that I take with me almost everywhere that I go. And like Bartok, I sometimes use the tunes for reference and experimentation, without feeling constrained by a particular genre.

Nestled between my copy of O'Neill's book and my *Real Book Vol. 2* is a petite brown book, no larger than a pamphlet, which I picked up in from Bretagne, a region on the Western coast of France with a curiously Celtic heritage. The book is called *20 Chansons Bretonnes*, and features a strange yet intriguing array of short popular Bretagne tunes from 1933, with lyrics written in French and Breton. I picked up the book in Bécherel, the "City of Books," after hearing a traditional Bretagne band play a wonderful set of tunes dedicated to a piece of local lore: The legend of the duck from Montfort-sur-Meu. The 15th-century tale tells of a beautiful girl, locked in the tallest tower by an oppressive lord, who couldn't make it to the church to be saved. In varying versions of the tale, the girl is either transformed into a female duck by Saint Nicolas and flies down to a nearby pond, or a duck flies up to the tower and then attends mass to save the poor girl's soul. Every time I play this tune, I think of the legend of the girl and the duck from Montfort-sur-Meu. Sometimes, I know very well that I'm playing the melody just to remember the story.

My beloved collection of tune books continues to grow. Aside from my many Real Books, Irish anthologies, bluegrass and New England collections, I have books filled with tunes written by teachers and experts from specific traditions. Some books focus on types of tunes, like waltzes or ballads, while others focus on region, like Clare in Ireland or Kentucky bluegrass, while still others look at specific frames of time, like the post-bop or cool jazz era. I try not to draw lines with regard to any of these factors, but rather choose to focus on the strength and continuity of a volume.

My collection sits on my shelf, filled from one end to the other with tunes waiting to be played. Tunes are not exactly fully formed pieces: They are sketches, outlines, frameworks for improvisation and performance. Tunes are designed to be played and replayed. They're meant to be embellished. This means that the tune itself leaves room for interpretation. A tune from any tradition becomes an amalgam of the musician and the music. The books call out at me to interact with them, to explore their pages, to grab an instrument and begin to play.

Since arriving at Princeton, my collection of tune books has changed in a big way. The Mendel Music Library is an incredible resource. Several times a month, I climb to the second floor and stand in front of the shelves of traditional music anthologies. I sift through books of tunes, moving from Japan to Croatia, New Orleans to Norway. I sing the melodies to myself. I photocopy tunes to learn on bass, mandolin, or guitar. I memorize them and teach them to friends. I play them at jam sessions. When I discover a tune I feel as if I've stumbled across a curious dish in a sprawling foreign marketplace. A tune is a precious thing; short, sweet, and memorable, it encapsulates the spirit of a culture in a direct and visceral way. Sitting in my dorm room and playing a Scottish tune

on the banjo is a transporting experience. My collection of tune books is my musical passport: It gives me license, resources, the inspiration to dive into melodies from different cultures. No matter how often I flip open a book of tunes, there's always something new for me to discover in my collection.