

Ron Poast

Ron Poast was born in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, in 1940 and grew up on a farm in the Blue Mounds area of Dane County. Musical house parties were regular and fondly recalled occurrences. Both grandfathers were old time ("hillbilly" and Norwegian style) fiddlers, Ron's dad played music, and he himself took up guitar. Ron's relatives also spoke of having seen and heard a peculiar, ornate, multi-stringed fiddle. It was not until years later that Poast saw such a fiddle, a Norwegian Hardanger fiddle, on display in the window of a Mount Horeb shop. By that time Poast--an inveterate wood and metal worker, builder of small airplanes, auto mechanic, classic car restorer, and luthier--had already been building guitars and banjos for C.C. Richelieu in Oregon, Wisconsin. He began to study how to make Hardanger fiddles.

Poast procured a how-to book from Norway, examined old instruments, visited Vesterheim, the Norwegian-American Museum, in Decorah, Iowa, and spoke with Hardanger players. Eventually he and his wife Joyce joined the Hardanger Fiddle Association of America. In making his fiddles, Poast seeks out bird's eye and curly maple from local lumberyards for the body, orders straight-grained Sitka spruce for the tops, and ebony for the fingerboard and tailpiece. Relying on templates and jigs of his own making, power tools for rough work and hand tools for fine, he shapes and forms the fiddles. Once the basic fiddle is formed, Poast completes the decorative work.

Although similar to the conventional or "flat" fiddle, the Hardanger is distinct in ways both subtle and apparent. Its wood is thinner and it is slightly lighter than the conventional fiddle or violin, and the gauge of Hardanger strings is also lighter. More obviously, the Hardanger fiddle has eight or nine strings: four ride atop the bridge and fingerboard and are bowed, four or five are strung through the bridge and below the fingerboard and resonate. In addition, the fingerboard is inlaid in traditional patterns with mother-of-pearl, the conventional fiddle's scroll is replaced by a stylized lion's head, and the purfling or inlaid ornamental border is supplemented, front and back, by symmetrical floral designs executed in India ink.

Currently laboring as a machinist, Poast is building a shop adjacent to his home in Black Earth and hopes, eventually, to be an instrument-maker and woodworker full time. Banjos require much less labor and command a larger market, but the Hardanger's capture Poast's imagination. He is one of four or five Hardanger fiddle-makers in the United States and is highly respected among Americans who have revived the art of playing this Norwegian fiddle.

Supporting Materials: 1) an article on Poast from Sound Post, the publication of the Hardanger Fiddle Association of America; 2) a brochure of the Hardanger Fiddle Association of America; 3) a brochure put out by Poast for his Poast Mark line of Hardanger fiddles; 4) taped interview & index; 5) slides and B&W.

Availability: Poast is willing to loan an instrument for the duration of the exhibit. In addition, Poast could loan some raw materials. Perhaps a plank of curly maple, a cut out top or back, an unfinished lion's head, tools, etc.

Special Considerations: Poast has a backlog of orders and must be contacted as soon as possible to insure that he has adequate lead time for making an instrument especially for loan to the exhibit.

TAPE LOG COVER SHEET

Wisconsin Folk Museum/for
Cedarburg Cultural Center
Mount Horeb, Wisconsin 53572

Date(s): October 13, 1989
Interviewee: Ron Poast
Address: [REDACTED]
Black Earth, Wisconsin 53515

Phone: [REDACTED]

Equipment Used: Superscope C-202LP
Stereo: no Dolby: no
Tape Brand/Length: Sony HF-60
Amount Used: Side 1: all
 Side 2: all
General Subject: musical instrument
 making
Fieldworker(s): James P. Leary
Recording Location: Poast's
 workshop
Other People Present: none

SUMMARY OF RECORDING CONTEXT AND TAPE CONTENTS

Poast has erected a shop behind his home and just adjacent to the spacious Shoe Barn parking lot along highway 14 in Black Earth. Currently Poast's workshop, the place will also have a front showroom for instruments and other crafts. Ron showed around his shop and we conducted most of the interview at his workbench so that he could illustrate his descriptions by picking up tools, wood, partially completed instruments, and the like. The session covered Poast's Norwegian background, his early experience with old time Scandinavian fiddling, and his interest in making instruments, especially Hardanger fiddles. The bulk of the interview, however, concerned the steps and nuances of fiddle construction.

TAPE INDEX

Ron Poast

October 13, 1989

Tape 1, Side 1.

1. Announcement.
2. Born in Dodgeville, WI, 1940, Iowa County. Grew up on three different farms around Barneveld/Blue Mounds area. Loved growing up on a farm. Work, hunting, fishing, self-reliance.
3. Father played violin, usually in winter after chores were done. Ron played guitar. Maternal grandfather, Thomas Lavaque (sp?), a contest fiddler, other grandfather played too. [Good quote.]
4. R always wanted to make instruments, fiddles especially.
5. Mother's people from around Cobb and Edmund, an area called the Blue Ridge. R didn't know his maternal grandfather too well. He died ca. 1948. But R enjoyed his fiddling. Would go over there on Sunday afternoons for informal playing. "I guess that's where you get your basis." Nowadays kids prefer rock 'n' roll.
6. Another uncle, Bill Kit____(?), played slide guitar. A steel stringed guitar with raised strings and played with a bar. Two of his brothers played instruments too. Just about every Sunday R went somewhere to play music.
7. Paternal grandfather, George Poast, played some for his own enjoyment. R's dad's name George Leo, but called Leo. They live in Mount Horeb on Blue View Drive. Family is Norwegian.
8. Repertoire mostly "old time country," also some Norwegian tunes.
9. No instrument makers in R's family. But as farmers they made a lot of their own stuff. R's curious if there are instrument makers among his ancestors. As a kid, R was unable to sit still. Was often in his dad's shop, fooling around with the tools. R's kids are the same, burrowing around in his shop. R was a mechanic for some years, working on classic cars.
10. When R very young heard about a decorated eight-string fiddle his mother's brother had. She didn't know what it was. R finally saw one on display in a shop window in Mount Horeb. [Good quote.] At the time R working for Richelieu in Oregon, making banjos and guitars. Knew general principles of instrument making. Got a book in Norwegian by Sever Sandvik on making hardanger fiddles. Plugged away with a dictionary and drawings. Was used to metric measurements from working on cars. Talked to Marion Nelson at Vesterheim, was able to examine and measure fiddles. Also had hardangers in for repair so he could examine them.
11. Not all instruments are the same. Can't vary too much with certain basics, but room for variation. Most of the hardangers made by individuals or families who fashioned only a few in their lifetime.
12. Differences in hardanger fiddles. Arching sometimes varies, i.e. the

degree to which the wood forming the top or the bottom arches out, thereby increasing the volume of the instrument's insides which allows for a bassier, more projected tone. More arch for a "harsh" tone, less for a "sweet" tone. Stradivarius' arch very shallow.

13. Fiddle's tone can also be varied by moving the bridge or the soundpost. Hardanger fiddle has a short scale and a violin has a long scale; "scale" is the distance between the bridge and the peg heads. Hardangers thinner than a regular fiddle, use a lighter gauge string. Four or five lower strings run from the neck, under the finger board, through the middle of the bridge, to the tailpiece. Bottom strings aren't bowed, but vibrate when top strings are. Instrument must be light enough so bottom strings vibrate. [Description of strings might be good for DHD.] Heavy hardanger probably won't have good tone.

14. Hard to buy good wood nowadays. Not enough instruments being built today so woodcutters can set it aside just for instrument makers. R hunts around for good wood. Sitka spruce for tops; back, sides, and neck are maple. Anything in the pine family acceptable for tops. R got used to sitka because he makes airplanes. Sound post is important.

15. A small amount of bridge indentation, made by tightening the strings, is good, but too much can cause the fiddle to collapse; too much tension also cuts down on volume because it lessens vibrations. Must work on a "ragged edge" to get the best tone. Can also vary tone by shifting sound post in relation to bridge. R tunes his tops and backs to a certain note to get a sense of their tone (a higher tone can be produced by taking more wood out of the top or back) so he can figure out where to place the soundpost.

16. R likes to have the bridge supported a little more than it should be because he doesn't want a top to collapse. Likes people to bring the fiddle back in three to six months, so he can see whether or not to move the soundpost.

17. On hardangers brought into Richelieu's shop for repair. Lots of older amateur players. Some had picked up a hardanger, all beat up, at flea markets. One fellow came in from Milwaukee with an old hardanger to be brought back into playing shape. Guy had paid \$40, Richelieu's shop offered \$500. Sue Wulfsburg of Blue Mounds eventually bought it from the guy for a higher price. Instrument was made by the Helland family, a noted family of Wisconsin hardanger fiddle makers.

18. R also knows a dentist (David Smedal) in Stoughton and a few other people who have old hardangers. Used to be an association of players years ago. Nowadays another Hardanger Fiddle Association trying to bring back the instrument and the dances.

19. The Norwegians who come to the USA now are quite opinionated about how the hardanger should be played.

End of Tape 1, Side 1, begin Side 2.

20. R mentions a number of Norwegian players who come on tour to this country, as well as several Americans, including Loretta Kelly of Los Angeles, and Andrea Een of Northfield, Minnesota.

21. R's clientele mostly people who already play violin and want to convert. You can play tunes for regular fiddle on hardanger, but without taking advantage of the hardanger sound. But those really interested in hardanger sound are younger people. R's clientele mostly midwestern. Two makers on the west coast, one on the east, one in Montana. But not enough customers to make a living on hardangers, hast to make other instruments. R has made 15 and expects he'll be lucky to sell 50 in his lifetime. He has made over 400 banjos.

22. On step-by-step process of making hardanger fiddles. First get the wood. Worth it to hunt around for good quality wood, which is expensive. Generally make two piece tops and two piece backs. Cut a piece from a board, turn it 180 degrees, cut it again, then "bookmatch" the two pieces. The grain is more consistent and the tone better this way. Two pieces are then glued down the middle.

23. Plain grained wood may sound better than curly grained wood, but the latter looks better. Curly grains come from trees out in the open that get a lot of wind action that compresses the grain and gives it a curly look. R uses good quality maple for back, sides, and neck. Tries to get all these parts made from the same piece of wood so that the look is matched.

24. R doesn't like to use curly wood for sides, however. Side wood has to be steamed and bent, straighter grain is stronger.

25. Tools. R uses power tools for initial rough cutting. Table saws, coping saws, power sanders. Fine work done by hand. Chisel-like gouges for roughing out tops. Can purchase ready-made gouges for \$20-\$30, but R buys good steel and grinds his own gouges. He's a machinist, so he knows what he's doing.

26. R makes templates off of old instruments. Templates from wood or from metal (plastic might bend).

27. Makes scrapers from sickle teeth, 10 for \$3, instead of buying one for \$15. Has to heat treat and temper the teeth, grinds to any shape he wants: curved, rounded.

28. After gouging and scraping, sanding. Begins with 180 grit, then to 220. Then puts sealer on, then takes steel wool to the sealer. Needs a dull finish to the ink for rosing stays on. Then sprays on an oil varnish. Puts color in the finish. Can't find ready made colored finish to suit him. Puts on several coats of colored finish, but must scrape every piece of pearl to get the color off. Finally puts on a clear finish.

29. Ink work done with a technical pen and India ink. Called "rosing." Lots of traditional patterns around, or you can make your own along traditional lines. R generally makes his own patterns. Puts on sealer. Daughter will print at newspaper office patterns on white paper. R traces the major lines on the fiddles to keep it symmetrical, then does flowers and so on freehand. Has made a little wooden tool to hold his pen while doing the borders so they're always the same distance from the edge. In between the borders or lines, cross-lines, scrolls, and dots are made. It takes hours to do this.

30. Asks \$1800 for a fancy fiddle, but doesn't make any money at it. Can make

something on banjos and guitars.

31. Pearl work. Likes to get the shell itself and cut it with a jeweler's saw. Purchases sheets of pearl shells too from a company called Pearlworks, \$25 an ounce for a sheet 60,000th of an inch. Has gotten pearl shells from Burnie's Rock Shop in Madison. Shells in Wisconsin River don't have the iridescence.

32. Cuts in teardrop shapes, round dots of varying sizes, etc.

33. Putting pearl on the ebony fingerboard: puts on clear lacquer to seal ebony, then flat white paint, places pearl in the pattern, then with fine tipped ballpoint pen traces around each pearl, then routs in the traced pattern, then glues in the pearls with epoxy and a colorant. Pearl is slightly raised above the level of the wood, then sanded down so it's flush.

34. Pearl patterns on fingerboards vary for hardanger fiddles: five, six, or seven dots.

35. Sometimes R gets orders to make one fiddle just like another.

36. Fingerboard is slightly arched and must be set just right. R's fingerboards are not generally solid ebony, but have a core of Sitka spruce. They're lighter and produce a better tone.

End of Tape 1, Side 2. Begin Tape 2, Side 1.

37. Understrings are very difficult to get in. R threads them by attaching the string to a stiff piece of wire. Upper strings relatively easy to string.

38. Bridge can sometimes bend from string pressure and will have to be replaced. Important to try to get it straight in the first place.

39. R suggests tuning hardanger one full tone above normal fiddle. Not EADG, but EADA. This is fairly standard hardanger tuning. Understrings are tuned in harmony with upper strings, tuned to the same note or an octave of that note. If upper strings are retuned, lower strings must be changed too. A time consuming process.

40. So as to tune the lower strings, R uses a guitar pick, but bows the upper strings.

41. A mythical lion or dragon forms the end of the hardanger neck. It is crowned, with a mane, teeth, and a protruding tongue that sets in a nostril. R adds a few freckles to mitigate the beast's fierce look. Plumes and maidens have also formed the fiddle heads.

42. Earliest dated hardanger fiddle from 1651. Had two understrings. Additional strings added periodically.

43. Lion's heads. Necks cut out with a bandsaw. Then puts in tuner holes for pegs. Then works of the head, careful not to make it look like a dog.

Shift from workshop to showroom for demonstration of sound.

44. Top strings tuned to EADA and understrings tuned up one full tone: AF#EDB.
[Might work with editing for DHD.]

End of Session.