

Bluegrass Fiddling

By Paul Shelasky

Farewell to the Great Byron Berline

The worlds of bluegrass and Texas fiddling are greatly saddened to learn of the passing of Byron Berline July 10.

As you will see from just a partial listing of the famous artists he recorded with, his playing touched on rock, country, pop, and so many other styles that he truly can be considered the most influential fiddler of his generation. Byron was always willing to share his knowledge with his many admirers, myself included, and he graciously jammed with just about everyone.

Born in 1944 in Caldwell, Kansas, he began fiddling at the age of 5 and his father, Lue, was an old-time fiddler of renown. Byron was soon winning fiddle contests across the nation and is a three-time winner of the National Oldtime Fiddlers' Contest in Weiser, Idaho. His 1965 album *Pickin' and Fiddlin'*, with the Dillards, inspired all the fiddlers of my generation and, for many of us, was our introduction to Texas/contest-style fiddling.

Byron joined Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys in 1967 and recorded three fiddle tunes with Bill – “Sally Goodin” and two Monroe compositions: “The Gold Rush” and the subject of this article, “Virginia Darlin’.” To quote from Neil V. Rosenberg's Monroe discography of 1974:

“Monroe's 1967 band included championship fiddler Byron Berline, and presumably this is why, for the first and only time in his career, Monroe took the band into the studio in the crowded month of August. Berline, who fiddled on three fine instrumentals, two Monroe compositions and his Texas-style Sally Goodin, was inducted into the Army shortly after the session.”

A look at Wikipedia will illustrate Byron's recordings and his phenomenal résumé, which includes recordings with the Rolling Stones, the Eagles, Elton John, Bob Dylan, the Byrds, the Flying Burrito Brothers – the list goes on and on and would fill this entire magazine. You will also see all the fine bands that Byron himself fronted over the years. My emphasis is strictly on his albums of fiddle tunes – the aforementioned *Pickin' and Fiddlin'* from 1965, *Dad's Favorites* from 1977, and the three 1967 tracks with Monroe. Byron has also recorded many fine albums of his original fiddle tunes, including his most recent triple-CD, *Early in the Morning*.

Analyzing Byron's bowing is a daunting task, even at half-speed, because he is so smooth that the bow changes are almost imperceptible. When I first heard Byron on record, in the early 1970s, the incredible smoothness led me to believe that there were clusters of notes on long, sweeping bow strokes, but seeing him in person, I was amazed that it was mainly all sawing – one note



Byron Berline, left, joined the Bluegrass Boys in 1967.

per bow. This incredibly refined technique should be an inspiration and a goal for all aspiring fiddlers. There appears to be considerable droning on the open E string, but I only heard it clearly in bars 6, 22, and 23.

I believe it was at a festival in Norco, California, in the late 1970s that I ended up on stage playing triple fiddles with Byron and the legendary Ray Park. Someone suggested “Sally Goodin” and Byron kicked it off, playing every known variation in such a superlative

manner that anything that followed would certainly pale by comparison. Ray and I just looked at each other, as if to say: “Who in the world could follow THAT?” The question was soon answered as Ray literally pushed me up to the microphone, and MY feeble solo got to follow the great Byron Berline!

All of Byron's recorded legacy should be required listening for every fiddler at every level and I would encourage everyone to check out Byron's website at doublestop.com.

[Paul Shelasky has performed and recorded with Laurie Lewis, The Good Ol' Persons, David Grisman, and others. He was the California State Fiddle Champion in 1975 and 1981. He currently plays jazz, bluegrass, and Irish music. His latest album is called *Fiddle Crazy*.]

[Ed. note: Paul Jacobs' 1998 interview with Byron, along with a transcription of Byron's tune “Jumpin' the Strings,” is available at fiddle.com/Articles-from-Sold-Out-Issues.page.]



Byron Berline

has been making instructional DVDs for over twenty years. He has breaks, licks, doublestops and 300+ tunes available; there's a three-tune minimum at \$10 per tune and \$10 for postage and handling.

The list of tunes can be found at doublestop.com.

Byron has just released a new triple CD, *Early in the Morning*, with over 60 original old-time, bluegrass and swing fiddle tunes.

For more information and a full listing of his books, CDs and DVDs, visit doublestop.com.
405-282-6646



Virginia Darlin'

Solo: Byron Berline, 1967; transcribed by Paul Shelasky.

A D

5 A E

9 A D

13 A E A

17 D

21 A E

25 A D

29 A E A

0 0
4 4

0 0
4 4