

Jody's Column

By Jody Stecher

“The Gold Rush”: All Three Parts as Played by Byron Berline in 1967

In 1964 a friend played me a reel-to-reel tape, made the year before, of a kid from the Kansas/Oklahoma border, not much older than me, playing fiddle as I had never heard it played before. I knew most of the tunes, though some variations were new to me. I was stunned. The playing wasn't flashy or complicated. What was unusual was the excellence of the playing and the strength of it. I wasn't surprised to find out that the player, Byron Berline, had been a star quarterback and had gone to college on a football scholarship. This was stout, confident playing. And now I'm stunned again. We've lost Byron Berline. News of his death was a shock. He sure seemed healthy to me.

I'm a pretty good fiddle player. I've won contests and been recorded. I've taught young players who became successful professionals. And I've gotten unsolicited compliments on my fiddling from fiddlers who have been called “heroes” and even “gods” by reviewers and fans. But when I met Byron Berline and he said, “I know you play mandolin but aren't you a fiddler too?” I replied, “I do play fiddle, but in the presence of Byron Berline I hesitate to call myself a fiddler.” People, let me tell you, the way that guy played was astonishing. What he played was good. It was rhythmic and it made melodic and harmonic sense. “Sally Goodin” sounded like “Sally Goodin,” if you know what I mean. But the way he made it sound was literally astonishing. He could play “Mary Had A Little Lamb” and you'd think it was the best melody that ever was.

His sound was a big part of it. Byron got that big wide sound on any fiddle he played. His bow grip – thumb under the frog – doesn't explain it. Plenty of other fiddlers hold the bow that way and they don't get that sound. The fact that he'd been fiddling since the age of 5 doesn't explain it either. One time I had the chance to study his bowing technique. We were both teaching at a music camp. During the instructors' concert, when I wasn't playing, I sat behind Byron when he was standing up at the microphone playing. I thought to myself that now I'd get to see his bowing patterns from his point of view rather than from in front. I found that he played mostly single bow strokes except when there was a musical reason to slur, to get two or more notes on one bow stroke. And sure, he did slur some. But mostly he played a smooth and lively series of down/ups. Well gosh, that's how *I* play and I never got a sound like his. And it wasn't just his bowing. I'll never forget the first time I heard him play “The Gold Rush,” which was also the first time I heard the tune. I thought the movement up to C sharp while the pinky held the A down on the D string was the prettiest thing I had ever heard. It wasn't an unusual fiddle-ism. It was beautifully in tune, but that wasn't it. The timing was a big part of it. But that doesn't explain why it was so thrilling and satisfying to hear. Rather than provide a checklist and negate each explanation, I'll get to the point. I think Byron Berline sounded the way he did because he had charisma. I use the word in the original Greek sense meaning divine gift.

Byron seemed to identify as an Oklahoman, although he was born just over the border in Kansas. During the time he was a member

of Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys, Monroe used to introduce him as “Barn Berline from the great state of Kansas.” Ever since its debut on a phonograph record a half century ago, just about everyone who plays “The Gold Rush” plays it as a two-part tune. According to what I've heard Byron say, “The Gold Rush” is a three-part tune. The first two parts were composed by Bill Monroe and Byron “messing around” on the bus on the way to and from gigs. The third part was composed by Byron on his own. Prior to recording the tune, the Blue Grass Boys played it on stage as a three-part tune, with each soloist playing all three parts sequentially. But at the recording session, Monroe suggested that the third part be played only at the end. Whether this was due to time constraints for what might become a 45 rpm “single” or for aesthetic reasons, using the third part as a “tag” at the end was musically effective, as was the slow fadeout on the record, reminiscent of the use of “Jenny Lynn” at the end of the recording of “Uncle Pen.”

Notes on the transcription

The first two parts of the tune are transcribed from Byron Berline's first solo on the recording. The second solo is nearly identical. The third time through the tune he plays some variations, some of which used the high A natural on the E string. As he only played the third part at the end, that is what I've tried to transcribe.

On the 1967 recording and every other time I've heard “Barn” play this tune, he used three varieties of G on the D string. There were the expected natural and sharp ones but the most frequently used G was just a bit sharp of natural. This adds color and atmosphere, and its absence in the playing of other fiddlers is one reason why “The Gold Rush” always sounds different (and for my taste, better) when played by Byron Berline. I have notated this pitch as G natural with an upward-pointing arrow placed above it. The G naturals on the E string are plain ol' G naturals and any G on the D string that has no special pitch indications is a G sharp as prescribed by the key signature of three sharps. The arrow above the second B in measure 26 indicates a pitch nearly as high as C natural. The middle finger lifts off briefly from C sharp before returning again. I think the index is pushing down the two middle strings and instead of being absolutely straight, the finger is slightly diagonal, causing the B to sound sharper than a perfect fifth above the E natural on the D string. It's a good sound.

(Another element [not notated here] that added atmosphere to the recording was the use of repeated A naturals on the bass fiddle, played by James Monroe. This small device has a big effect.)

Over the years “The Gold Rush” has become associated with an expected “bump” in the second part of the tune. In later years Byron himself adopted it in his bowing from time to time. But you will not find that in the notation because on his recording with the Blue Grass Boys he didn't play it that way. Careful listening to the recording shows that the bump is being played behind the fiddling by the mandolin and especially the banjo.

Byron Berline's bowing was smooth; what seems like “long bow” slurring is really noise-free single bow strokes. He always included some slurs in “The Gold Rush.” I have indicated the slurs I am pretty sure about. I think there may be others. Maybe you can figure them out.

One thing I have not notated is the frequent “rhyming” of the open A string with the same pitch on the D string, gotten with the little finger, and the same thing with E played on strings 1 and 2 together. Also some of the melody notes on the second string were accompanied by the open E string. For ease of reading, I have omitted this from the notation. Listen to the recording and you'll know what to do.

The Gold Rush

Transcribed by Jody Stecher as played by Byron Berline in 1967.

◀ Listen at fiddle.com (click on Tune sound/video files in the left-hand menu)

Bill Monroe & Byron Berline

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[Jody Stecher lives in San Francisco, where he plays and teaches fiddle and a variety of other instruments. Jody has numerous recordings

available and has twice been nominated for a Grammy. For information on recordings, performances, and more, visit jodyandkate.com.]