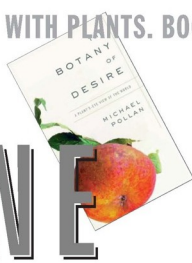


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The Seattle Times



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# A & E SCENE

No Lacitis today  
Erik Lacitis is on vacation.

THE SEATTLE TIMES ♦ SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

SECTION J

SUNDAY, JUNE 17, 2001



The amazing Stripling can play a trick version of "Pop Goes the Weasel" with the bow between his knees, behind his back (Bruce Reid is at right), under his leg and backwards. And at far right, he takes time out from his fiddle-playing to sing a song.



# The music in my dad's SOUL

LEE STRIPLING, THE FATHER OF TIMES STAFF REPORTER SHERRY STRIPLING, STRUMMED HIS FIRST TUNES WHEN HE WAS ONLY 8. HE LEARNED THE OLD-TIME FIDDLE TRADITION FROM HIS FATHER. BUT IT WASN'T UNTIL MUCH LATER IN LIFE THAT THE 79-YEAR-OLD SON OF AN ALABAMA SHARECROPPER FOUND A REBIRTH IN THE RHYTHMS OF WESTERN SWING.



BETTY UDESEN / THE SEATTLE TIMES



Lucille and Lee Stripling were "bitten by the love bug" in Seattle during World War II.

BY SHERRY STRIPLING  
Seattle Times staff reporter

Twice in his life, fiddle music has been my dad's salvation: First as a sharecropper's son in rural Alabama and then as a man in his late 70s, adrift in grief for my mother.

The story of Lee Edwin Stripling playing as a youngster is the simpler and more charming of these two tales of redemption.

That story's set in the Great Depression. It has cotton fields, mules and the image of my dad so young his feet dangle from his chair as he plays at dances with his famous fiddler father to earn coins tossed on the stage.

But the story of him being rediscovered is at least as inspiring, if not more so.

After a gap of 40 years, with my father happily married but his fiddle mostly tucked away, young revivalists of the old-time fiddle tradition find Charlie Stripling's son hidden in Seattle, a long way from the South.

When my mother died, my sister and I watched as our dad's dependency moved from us to these dancing, e-mailing, fiddle-playing folkies who dragged him from mourning to playing rusty renditions of his father's tunes.

"How's your dad?"

They're forming a band around him.

"What's new with your father?"

He's making a CD.

And then something really unexpected happens: In the past two years my father, who turns 80 in August, has become his own musician. He's got his dad's songs down, but he's also come alive with his own music — irrepressible Western swing.

"Your dad?" Off to North Carolina to play at Merlefest, where he's hoping, really hoping, to bump into Dolly Parton backstage.

## How it all started

The story of my father's start is becoming stage fodder: little pieces of backwoods country lore coaxed out of him by his ever-supportive guitar player, WB, "Bruce" Reid.

Bruce is one of the three middle-aged "youths" in my dad's band, "Lee Stripling and His Six-Footed Boys."

PLEASE SEE **Fiddler** ON J 2



Charlie Stripling, Lee's father, is a member of the Fiddler's Hall of Fame.



# Music lights the soul of fiddler, 79

## FIDDLER

CONTINUED FROM J 1

The most aptly described by height of this group is bass player Tony Mates; coming up short is plectrum banjo player Glenn Dudley.

Yankees all, but nonetheless good musicians, my dad says.

First the roots:

My grandfather was Charlie Stripling, who's in the Fiddler's Hall of Fame.

With Charlie's brother Ira on guitar, the Stripling Brothers made 42 recordings from 1928 to 1936, traveling from Kennedy, Ala., as far as New York City at the height of the Depression.

Legend has it fiddle contestants conceded first place when my grandfather arrived. Or, as an old fiddler told Joyce Cauthen, author of "With Fiddle & Well-Rosined Bow: Old-Time Fiddling in Alabama," the "rest of us put our fiddles back in our feed sacks."

But as my mother loved to tell, it wasn't my father's dad who first taught him and his older brother Robert to play; it was their mother, Tellie Sullivan.

Tellie taught the boys basic chords — C, G, F — when a visitor left behind a Gibson mandolin and guitar. Then the boys surprised their dad by strumming along when he played "Little Brown Jug" that night.

My dad was 8, as he recalls, about the same age he began working the fields. Within a month, Charlie and the boys won their first contest.

Music became an important cash crop for the family after a bank closure led to the loss of the family store and farm.

From then on, the family was "working on the halves," my dad says, farming another man's land, living in his shack and sharing half what they earned in cotton and corn.

At \$300 a year, it was impossible to get ahead, but they could double that by playing at dances and concerts.

Barefoot, dressed in overalls, it was a point of pride not to mention how hot it was working the hoe or driving the mules, my dad says.

But in Joo-lee and August, they would lay by for a little "respite," leaving the cotton grow and the corn harder for corn meal.

At night, they'd get in the Model T — or Graham-Paige if it was after 1930 — and drive the country roads to dances.

Playing repetitious songs for long square dances, my father, who usually went to bed with the chickens, nodded off.

"My dad would reach over and tap me on the head lightly with a fiddle bow just to wake me up," my father recalls. "But somebody wrote that I'd never miss a beat."

His father's family got ahead through Roosevelt's "Mules and Tools" program, which increased his share of the crops by giving him a break on his own equipment.

My dad and his brother Robert took advantage of another New Deal program, the Civilian Conservation Corps. There, just as they would in the service in World War II, they formed their own bands.

But it wasn't their father's good ol' mountain music they played, it was Western swing!

## Rediscovering his roots

Now move forward 20 years to what can only be called the "flat tire" era of my dad's playing: The years he depended on me for guitar accompaniment.

"C" he'd shout patiently when I'd miss a chord change, forcing him to lift his chin from his father's old fiddle.

"G."

"D. No, no, back to C!"

In the early 1980s, a Seattle music folklorist, Sandy Bradley, came to visit the north Ballard rambler my folks purchased a few years after they were "bitten by the love bug" during the war.

As a special treat, my dad got out the 1971 reissue of his father's recordings.

"And when I played it," my father said recently, "she said, 'Well, you know, I have that record and I know a hundred fiddlers in Seattle that have that record.'"

"And I said, 'There can't be 100 fiddlers in Seattle!'"

But there are. CEE-Attle, as my Uncle Robert calls the place to which my father defected, is some kind of folk-music Mecca.

Sandy Bradley booked my dad on her weekly "Potluck" radio show with guess who as his accompanist.

"C!"

"No, C!"

Somehow his career didn't quite take off. But he was still invited to parties held by Kerry and Sheila Blech, who keep old-time music history alive.

He was rusty, no doubt about it, but there was something there:

It was the driving dance rhythm, Bradley says, and unusu-



Above, Sherry Stripling and her father, Lee; below, Lee, right, and his brother, Robert, in their Civilian Conservation Corps uniforms in the early 1940s.

al ways to turn a phrase to inject a touch of sweetness.

"There is an authenticity which comes from really owning your own music, the ear making all the choices about what to play," she says.

"Lee's playing carries with it many generations of truthful music."

## Overcoming his grief

In January 1998, my mother died.

Before taking her ashes home to Montana, my sister Carol and I took our dad back to Alabama to be with his eight brothers and sisters.

As always when we went to the old home place, neighbors came from miles around to hear the Striplings make music, just as they had in the 1920s.

We worked through a lot of grief in the comfort of family, sweet tea and black-eyed peas, but we worried about our dad's future.

Would he be able to live on his own?

His gray eyes seemed vague. His thoughts didn't track. I've always said my dad is the kindest person I know. But now he reported daily quarrels with store clerks.

And then he met Bruce.

Still too afraid to go out in life without a companion, he enlisted my sister to take him to a party at the home of Kerry and Sheila Blech, where music would be played all night.

Bruce Reid was newly arrived from California. He'd been trying to learn Charlie Stripling's showpiece tune, "Lost Child," for eight years. He rushed down to the basement to meet my dad.

It was a music marriage made in heaven.

For the first time since my dad's brother Robert accompanied



him, here was someone who could strum along in my dad's favorite key, the dreadful B-flat.

Now my dad had someone to practice with. As the rustiness chipped away, Bruce and the boys encouraged him to play at a contra dance, which is more structured than square dances.

It was his first paying gig since the early 1940s.

He does more than practice. He goes to dances, learns the steps and studies the players' techniques. Songs from his past keep coming forward to join new songs.

Tony Mates, bass fiddle player: "His eagerness is amazing. I keep seeing in him the teenager that he must have been: enthusiastic, hardworking, generous and friendly."

When he was invited to teach at Port Townsend's Festival of American Fiddle Tunes last summer, the "boys" supported him in making "Hogs Picking Up Acorns," so they'd have a CD to sell.

My dad dragged up his reluctant brother Robert, who'd just lost his wife and was worried about the effects of a stroke on his guitar playing.

## Lee Stripling and His Six-Footed Boys

Lee Stripling and His Six-Footed Boys are scheduled to play for a contra dance at the Lake City Community Center, one block north of Northeast 125th Street on 28th Avenue Northeast, 8-11 p.m. Sept. 20. To purchase the CD "Hogs Picking Up Acorns," e-mail Lee Stripling at LeeStrOleTimeFiddler@peoplepc.com or go through Voyager Recordings by calling 206-323-1112 or e-mail: orders@voyagerrecords.com.

Now he's on the comeback trail, too, in Alabama.

"I AH-PREE-SHEE-ate-it," they'd say in unison as they walked around the grounds at Fiddle Tunes, absorbing compliments.

This spring, with good-hearted Bruce and his wife, Bonnie Zahnow, my dad and uncle toured the Southeast. Stops included their old hometown and bigger venues in North Carolina and Tennessee.

Their hook is that they are Charlie Stripling's sons, Bruce says. And my father, who for a long time rebelled against his father's music, has come to accept and AH-PREE-SHEE-ate-it.

But now in addition to "Black My Boots And Go See The Widow," he's playing "I Only Want A Buddy Not A Sweetheart" and other get-up-and-dance tunes from the '30s and '40s.

Just his Irish luck, swing music is hot again.

Who he is as a musician is becoming more valid because he's coming into his own, Bruce says.

There are other musicians who are technically more proficient in Bruce's view because they didn't have a gap of 40 or 50 years.

"But I've watched a few dozen good musicians watch Lee play and just get really delighted by the sounds."

At the recent Northwest Folklife Festival, my dad and the boys played a swing dance. He was clearly in his element.

Two days later at the fiddle contest, he pulled out a trick version of "Pop Goes the Weasel" in which he plays the fiddle behind his back, under his leg and on his head. It worked, just as it has for 70 years: He won.

"It's really going," he said afterward, enthusiasm bubbling from his usual cauldron of optimism. "I'm picking the right song at the right place."

Now friends ask for my father's autograph. They still inquire how he's doing, but their interest in his mending heart has changed.

"My Mom wants to know: Is your Dad seeing anyone?"

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