



# **The Devil's Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling (Vanderbilt/Country Music Foundation Press)**

*Charles Wolfe*

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A unique and illuminating overview of the traditions of Southern fiddling, covering the key performers and compositions that defined that genre during its golden age--from the 1920s to the 1950s--and that continue to influence popular music today.

It was called "the devil's box" because the instrument was thought to be sinful to play. Yet in spite of (or perhaps partially because of) that stigma, the fiddle has long been one of America's favorite instruments.

Easily portable, stylistically versatile, and possessing an enchanting timbre, it accompanied the European settlers across America. In the 1800s, the fiddle entertained on the battlefield and on the campaign trail. When country music made its first appearance on records in the 1920s, fiddlers called the tune. To this day, the fiddle remains a distinctive element of country music, and fiddlers like Alison Krauss and Mark O'Connor are among the music's biggest stars and most innovative artists.

The key players and favorite tunes in the commercial emergence of Southern fiddling in the first half of the twentieth century are the focus of this lucid and engaging study. Among the lively portraits that emerge in *The Devil's Box* are those of:

Eck Robertson, the audacious Texas fiddler who jump-started the country music recording industry in 1922 by showing up unannounced at the studios of Victor Records and demanding to be recorded;

Uncle Jimmy Thompson, the feisty, white-bearded, rural fiddler whose appearance on radio station WSM in Nashville inaugurated the Grand Ole Opry;

Clayton McMichen, the dazzlingly talented but disgruntled fiddler's fiddler who preferred jazz to country music and who could never live down his early years in country music's first supergroup, the Skillet Lickers; and

Bob Wills, who popularized western swing by combining fiddle music with the sounds of big band swing and who never abandoned the fiddle music of his youth, even after dance music became far more lucrative.

Elsewhere, Wolfe discusses the background of such famous fiddle tunes as "Black Mountain Rag" and "Over the Waves," tracing their meandering and curious paths to widespread popularity, and explains how Stephen Vincent Benet's 1925 classic poem "The Mountain Whippoorwill" was inspired by country fiddler Lowe Stokes winning an Atlanta fiddle contest in 1924.

Drawing on such seldom-tapped resources as small regional newspapers, personal correspondence, and rare interviews with the fiddlers themselves as well as their families, Wolfe conjures up vivid portraits of the individuals who fashioned this distinctly American music. Along the way, he places the fiddlers and their music in a rich historical context, illuminating the threads that connect country music to blues, jazz, folk, and classical music--and, indeed, to the history of America itself.

*Co-published with the Country Music Foundation Press*

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