Spine

Extended Liner Notes

We're often asked where our music comes from and why we do it. The short answers are "America" and "because we like it," but here are some more bits and pieces about **Spine**: the songs, the recording, art and text, plus some ideas and leads to follow up on. For us, **Spine** is complete as it is. These notes should answer some frequently asked questions, but, hopefully, not encourage the idea that you need to know a lot of facts in order to "get it." (Get it?) All four of us contributed to the notes, but Tim wrote most of it, and it's him talking when first person singular is used. You can find more on our web page, <http://www.cordeliasdad.com>.

1. Granite Mills Watching TV in the USA you'd think Canada was somewhere beyond the moon. We certainly don't hear much about the history of conflict and cultural and economic ties between New England and the Maritimes and Quebec. A lot of the people who worked in the Massachusetts mills in the late 19th century came from Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Quebec, many of them young girls (especially well documented in all that's been written about the mills in Lowell). After a concert last year we talked with a man whose family had worked the mills in Fall River for several generations. He said the fast and furious nature of the mill work meant the machines had to be oiled frequently, often carelessly. The combination of oil-soaked pine floors with inadequate exits, fire fighting equipment, and alarms, was a recipe for disaster. The fire this song is about was burning for 15 minutes before the alarm was even sounded. I made the tune for this one.

2. Imaginary Trouble Lena Bourne Fish of East Jaffrey, New Hampshire sang some great songs, including some she made up. Like a lot of them, this story goes back 200 years or so, and she said it was sung a lot in Revolutionary War camps. The best place to find out more about her is Anne Warner's *Traditional American Folk Songs*. Anne and Frank Warner met Grammy Fish towards the end of her life in 1940, and the attention they and Helen Hartness Flanders called to her helped create a regional interest in her and her songs. She even made a little hand typed collection for people who were interested. The Warners weren't professionals, but it seems the importance they placed on values like friendship and respect led them to conclusions and practices that are still fairly novel in academic methodology 60 years later. For example, they kept in contact with their singer friends and their families, valued their ideas about things and paid attention to the ramifications, economic and otherwise, of their work. It also seems they were more interested in hearing a wide range of the songs people liked and learning what they meant to the singers and their communities (the sorts of things you want to know about your friends), than in looking for songs that suited one position or another in the various debates and theories of the day. I made the tune for this one too, not that there's anything wrong with the regular one. The music is sort of an experiment.

3. Knife There's a lot written by and about Vance Randolph, and it's definitely worth checking out. Nearly 25% of the songs and stories he noted down in the better part of a lifetime spent in the Ozarks he never included in his books because they were too intense for the publishers. *Roll Me in Your Arms* is an amazing collection of this material, edited and annotated by Randolph's friend, the equally amazing Gershon Legman, an expatriate folklorist/Bible scholar/one time Kinsey Report researcher and opponent of "folk$inging." The book is worth

reading both for the songs and for Legman's provocative writing and ability to see connections between seemingly unrelated things. Because of the nature of the songs many singers didn't wish to be identified, so this comes from the singing of "Mr. C.I., Walnut Shade, MO." It's hard to see anything offensive in this beautiful, playful story. It is, however, one of the tamest things in the book.

4. Wake Up This mostly comes from John G. McCurry's 1855 *Social Harp*, a book of hymns printed in shape notes and designed for use in singing schools and social singing. He includes only the first verse, which, in the context of the other songs in the book, could sound like a hymn. The rest of the story comes from the singing of Lee Monroe Presnell, recorded by the Warners. Negotiating boundaries between the sacred and secular has been an important part of this country's history, particularly its musical history. Musical categories aren't written in stone, and usage, values, elements of style, even whole song forms shift, change color and are recombined, sometimes emerging where you least expect them: part recycling, part ongoing conversation. Parody, comic and serious, is part of that exchange. Following the lead of John Wesley and others, American evangelicals reclaimed some of the devil's best tunes ("Here's a health to lads and lasses" becomes "Here's my heart my loving Jesus"). On the other hand, when Timothy Mirick of Wilbraham Massachusetts died of a snake bite in 1761, people sang about it to the *Old Hundred* psalm tune. I recently got a 19th century hymnbook whose owner, a girl in Gilead, CT, replaced "All hail the power of Jesus' name" in the old hymn *Coronation* with "All hail the power of gin and rum." Check out the recording of Social Harp singing led by Hugh McGraw, put out by Rounder Records with great notes by Daniel Patterson.

5. Clyde Davenport Tunes A typical day for us involves some combination of driving and music-making. On the way to Alabama a few months before making this album, we stopped in Tennessee to meet Clyde Davenport. He and his wife graciously invited us in to their sitting room, showed us his Presidential citation (he was a National Heritage Award Winner in 1992 and played at the inaugurations of Presidents Reagan and Bush) and told us to "play something." We did, and though it took some convincing to get Clyde going ("I can't play," he repeated), we spent the next few hours trading songs and tunes. *Jenny in the Cotton Patch*, *Sally in the Garden*, and *Callahan* are three of the tunes he played. The extra racket you hear is Peter hitting the fiddle strings with bamboo knitting needles, a trick he picked up from a recording of Maggie Hammons on the Library of Congress record *The Hammons Family*, recently reissued on compact disc. Mr. Davenport has made several great recordings that are commercially available and he's got a web site.

6. Spencer Rifle Another from Randolph's work. I recently saw a TV news feature on "civility" in which the anchorman claimed "in the old days, song lyrics hinted at things, but never actually said them," implying that this was a preferable situation. I don't know which "old days" he was thinking of. An audience member in the gun-toting town of Amherst, Mass. told us that shooting off-handed just means using your right hand if you're a lefty and vice versa.

7. Montcalm and Wolfe The British victory at Quebec City in 1759 is considered a decisive moment, ensuring Britain's dominance (over France at least) in North America. Both generals died in the battle, which is said to have lasted only 20 minutes. The song, often called "the first American ballad," has traveled a lot and is still pretty well remembered in both the US and England. The Warners met New York state lumberman Yankee John Galusha in 1939, recorded

him singing this song in 1940, and were in contact with him until he died ten years later at the age of 91. I think one of Elektra Records first releases includes Frank Warner singing the song. Probably the most enduring image of James Wolfe the hero comes from the painting of his death scene by Benjamin West from Pennsylvania. It made its way into even the humblest homes in the form of a popular inexpensive print. It's a heroic, grandiose scene, but it was shockingly realistic at the time. (Nobody was wearing a toga). It's been interesting playing this in Quebec, where there are very different ideas about Wolfe. After playing with the great Quebecois band ***Entourloupe***, Daniel asked us "hey, what's all this 'Wolfe/hero' stuff." Check out *Dead Certainties* by Simon Schama, and Francis Parkman's mammoth history of the French in North America. (I haven't read Parkman, but Jeff Davis says it's good. While you're at it, check out Jeff Davis.)

8. In the Cars on the Long Island Railroad This is based on a little tune William Sidney Mount wrote in 1850, and played on a violin of his own design which he called the "cradle of harmony." The instrument, and Mount's paintings, made a big impression on me when I saw them as a kid at the Museums at Stony Brook. Among his claims to fame is that he was one of a very few earlier Americans to paint black people (especially musicians) without making them look foolish. Maybe it had something to do with his growing up around a man named Anthony Clapp who, although he may have been a slave, was very highly regarded in the community, particularly for his excellent violin playing. His painting of a man playing a fretless banjo has been used on several album covers, Rounder's *Altamont* being the easiest to find. Mount played fiddle for dances and wrote down a lot of tunes over the years; tunes from his youth, tunes his brother sent him from Georgia where he taught a dancing school, little classical sounding pieces, pop songs, slow airs and dance pieces from the Scottish music craze... His manuscripts, like many tune and hymn books of the time, reflect the great diversity of mid 19th century American popular music. Mount traveled back and forth from his family's place in Stony Brook to his aunt and uncle's in New York City where he studied painting, and it must have made things a lot easier when the railroad was finished. (Early 1840's?). By my day the train no longer chugged like it does in the song, but we took the same route to go to hardcore matinees at CBGB. There's lots written about Mount.

9. Louis Boudreault Tunes More from Quebec. Le Reel à Neuf and Le Reel à Philibert are from a recording of Quebecois fiddler Louis Boudreault. The tape is simply called *Old Time Fiddler of Chicoutimi, Quebec* and is two sides of straight fiddle and feet. Highly recommended. Massachusetts had a daily paper in French until the 1930s, and the sign coming into Winchendon, Mass., still reads "Bienvenue a Massachusetts."

10. Three Babes I'm a bit hazy on this one. This story shows up all over the place, but I most clearly remember seeing it in Pete Seeger's banjo book, and I suspect my singing owes a lot to that printing. The tune reminds me of Dillard Chandler's *Rain and Snow*.

11. Abe's Retreat Dwight Diller has made several recordings which you can get directly from him at Hillsboro, WV 24946 (that's all you need). It's always enjoyable and educational hanging out with Dwight. As much as we enjoy his recordings, hearing him play for real is a whole other story, and not to be missed. Words he uses to describe this tune include "deep" and "lonesome." For us it's more of a work in progress than most songs are. I don't generally see the point or possibility of copying someone exactly, but when there's such a depth of style and a

song has such personal meaning for someone, there's a lot to be said for trying. Dwight learned this tune on the fiddle, adapted it to banjo, and made up the tuning.

12. Pilgrim I don't know a better depiction of the soul homesick for heaven than this one by Samuel Stennett, an English Baptist. The hymn was extremely popular in the late 18th century US, and I bet we know a dozen tunes for it that are still in use.

13. Return Again These words get around, but this is the tune I've seen them with most often. (A number of people have told us they know the tune from "Come thou fount of every blessing"). It's a hymn, but definitely not a church song; more what used to be called "vestry music," or music for less formal religious gatherings like camp meetings. Most of the "field manuals," hymn books designed for use at these large outdoor revival meetings, contain words only. The tunes used are often those which are/were well known or easy to learn. Especially on chorus songs it's easy for everyone to join in. It's also one of the kinds of songs preachers took with them when they traveled. Lorenzo Dow from Coventry, Connecticut, included this hymn (and the previous one) in a field manual he put together in 1804 for his second preaching trip to Britain. Methodism originated in England, but in the US it became potent in ways I doubt the English could have anticipated. To Dow, true religion wasn't really possible without democracy, and democracy, to much of Europe's upper classes around 1800, meant anarchy and possibly getting your head cut off. On his second of three trips to Britain, Dow preached illegally in Ireland and England for 3 years, largely, though not exclusively, to members of the lower classes, especially around Manchester. He preached before the sun came up and the work day started, he preached in coal pits at lunch time, sometimes he preached five times in a day, walked thousands of miles during his stay, and when words failed him, he sang. By the time he left, in 1807, he had helped set in motion a major religious and social movement to which American style camp meetings and music were central. Last time we toured England we spent some time at the Primitive Methodist chapel/museums at Mow Cop and Englesea Brook, where I ran across an 1857 account from a man who said that before he joined the Primitive Methodists he had heard "they sang so loudly that they made people's heads ache." Many English preachers and songs came to the US as well, and there's been a lot more of this sort of back and forth than is currently on the books. The harmony is by William L. Williams, 1850, an American, and not the Welsh author of *Guide Me Oh Thou Great Jehovah*. This version (plus a treble part) appears in *The Sacred Harp*, which was first published in 1844 in Bremen, Georgia. It's still in print and gaining momentum. This book, and shape note music in general, provide many examples of the complexity of influences and interrelationships in American popular music. If you want to find out more about the music or, more importantly, where you can go to sing it, check out Buell Cobb's *The Sacred Harp-A Tradition and its Music*, search for *Fasola* on the worldwide web, or contact the Sacred Harp Publishing Co., 1010 Waddell St. Bremen, GA 30110. There's nothing much on Dow, but dozens of 19th century editions of his journal are easy to find at libraries and used book stores.

Recording We'd heard a number of Steve Albini's recordings over the years, from the ***Effigies*** and ***Naked Raygun*** to more recent, radio friendlier stuff like ***PJ Harvey*** and ***The Breeders***. We like the immediacy and clear, realistic sound- the feeling of being in the room with the band- which he captures so well. Our rock band, ***io,*** recorded with him at his studio in Chicago, a project as yet unreleased because the label folded, and it went so well we asked him to come to Massachusetts to record **Spine**. We chose the familiar and close to home Slaughterhouse (there

are still meat hooks hanging on the wall) where we had recorded **Comet**. When Steve agreed to come he said that most rock studios are essentially the same, but we suspect Slaughterhouse's large vermin population and lack of toilet might have changed his mind. One day while rewinding a master tape, it suddenly snapped. He discovered the dried remains of some sort of juicy bug which had gotten caught in the tape, making it stick together. Fortunately it wasn't an important take. The recording is almost entirely live, with three or four overdubs for various reasons. Steve's approach to recording was extremely helpful. The idea is that we, the musicians, should set up in the way that felt the most natural and he, the engineer, would take care of recording it and dealing with whatever technical problems arose. It sounds sort of obvious (pragmatism over "wizardry"), but you'd be amazed how many times people have insisted things like "you can't record like that, there's not enough isolation." Trying to play music while wearing headphones and standing by yourself in a foam lined box is something people have come to expect but, like stargazing on the internet, it's stupid. Steve likes to mix down to analog tape for ease of editing, which is no longer the standard practice, and we had a hard time finding a machine to use. Albini spent practically a whole day calling all over what he referred to as "West Idiot" with very little luck, even after resorting to talking like a bigshot. ("Hi this is Steve Albini. I'm... *important*.") On the final day of mixing we had five machines in various stages of disrepair, which Steve was operating on with a tool he made out of a plastic knife. We wound up using a machine our friend Jim Hemingway very kindly borrowed from his old job and drove a long way to bring to us, without which we would have been sunk. We finished mixing minutes before Steve had to go catch a plane for Chicago to pack for a four month stint recording Jimmy Page and Robert Plant at Abbey Road, where they have catering and, presumably, toilets.

The Art Christopher Lyman, "Cricket," does fabulous things with rocks, logs, bones and film, to name a few. Something about his art (imagination and recycling?) seems absolutely right for **Spine**. The beauty, confidence and suggestive power of his photography is partly responsible for our decision not to burden the CD with text. The images were created without the aid of a computer, although Lori Fraser and Cricket used one to do the wonderful layout. The vertebra belonged to a cow, and we found it on a ranch we stayed at while playing in small towns west of Yosemite.

The Quotes The quotes were included less for their literal meaning than for the images and ideas they might animate, and as suggestions of some things to investigate that are relevant to the music. Still, they were chosen intentionally, and I think the reasons are interesting. **"'Times ain't as they used tew be'-this has been the sollum and wize remark ov mankind ever since Adam was a boy" -** Josh Billings was the creation of Henry Wheeler Shaw, a contemporary of Mark Twain who began publishing in the late 1850's. His "affurisms" were widely published, and often remind me of early Simpsons: concise, seemingly outsider observations aimed at insiders. Like Homer says, "it's funny cuz it's true." When transatlantic steamships started running in the 1830's a lot of people were panicked that, with new ideas and products coming from Europe every fortnight, American culture was doomed. Same worries about the telegraph, television, internet and even literacy (going way back); the death of the local, the traditional, the familiar, the natural, the real... I guess people have always been afraid they were losing something . When it comes to the sorts of songs we sing, the whole idea of "preservation" encourages the bad habit of dealing with things, not as they are, but as they used to be, or as we might wish they used to be. Preserving strawberries can't preserve the moment in the strawberry patch. If we inject the preserves with all our wishful thinking about the moment in the strawberry patch, eventually completely replacing the preserves with the ideas, we miss

what's good about the jam. Or something. In other words, this music is here and now, a product of the times. It does have "roots" and historical and cultural interest, but so do the Spice Girls. **"...the grandson boasts 'have not I got a horse? I have. My grandfather raised him, willed him to my father, who gave him to me and I can prove by the neighbors he ran such a race, and won such a prize'- but on closer inspection it is found only the bones are remaining."** This is part of Lorenzo Dow's description of what he saw as a major difference in religion and general attitude between the English and Americans. He found that, when asked whether or not they were religious, English people's answers were often concerned, not with how they themselves thought or lived, but with how long their family had been prominent in the local parish or how much money their grandparents had given to the church. This seems to be an example of the perennial popular belief that, simply put, culture and history are genetic; a belief which surfaces in rhetoric of both the American "right" and "left," is fundamental to the creation and perpetuation of "ethnic conflict," is institutionalized in the funding policies of many grant agencies, and which plagues popular thinking about many of the styles of music we play. There's a ton to read on related topics, but especially good are *Good Friends and Bad Enemies* by Deborah Kodish, *The Legend of Henry Ford* by Keith Sward, *The Imagined Village* by Georgina Boyes, *The Flivver King* by Upton Sinclair, *Some Thoughts on Music and Politics in Bosnia* by Mirjana Lausevic...

The Instruments: people ask, so...

The frame drums were made by Cooperman Fife and Drum in Bellows Falls, Vermont. One has a goatskin head, the other has a fiberskyn (plastic) head. Peter hits them with a stick.

The guitar is a Taylor 512. It's usually tuned somewhere around CFCFFC, except for track 7 (BbFCFGC) and track 8 (CFCFGC). The strings are phosphor bronze, 56, 46, 36, 24, 24, and a plain steel 17.

The banjo was made by Ellis Wolfe of Butler, Tennessee (a genius) from a native walnut beam his father got out a barn that was being dismantled. The tuning is Dwight Diller's gGDGD, more or less. The strings were on it when I got it in 1991.

The fiddles The one in standard tuning has Dominant strings on it and was made in Frankfurt, Germany in 1908. The one in GDGD, tracks 5 and 11, has steel strings and it just sort of appeared one day. It's a Guarneri, apparently.

The dulcimer was made by Ellis Wolfe from the same beam as the banjo. It's tuned ADDD.

The accordions are a Hero "hand wind instrument" (a literal translation from the Chinese) and a Golden Cup.