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Refrain:

Notes on Crafting Music

BY ERIC L. BALL

[*Editor's Note:* This is the third of three parts in Eric Ball's essay trilogy, *Homemade Music: A Family Tree*. The previous part, "Virtuous Versifying: A Composition About Rhymes," appeared in *Voices* 45 (1–2), Spring–Summer 2019.]

Old photographs of ancestors in black and white remind me—

What matters isn't what I've got, but what I leave behind me.¹

I'm crafting a new batch of music, using tunes from John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (Sturgis & Walton Company, 1917 edition), when suddenly, I'm interrupted by an urge to clean house.

I put Lomax aside and start inspecting various boxes and piles that need organizing. Many contain items that I accumulated over the years from my paternal grandfather—from army dog tags to homemade woodcrafts; from cigarette lighters to his death certificate.

I've also got plenty of things from Grandpa that I'm *not* worried about organizing, because they're still in use. These include:

- One leather jacket. Brown. Grandpa bought it at a garage sale and handed it down to me in the late 1980s.

- Furniture built by Grandpa in his garage, including:

- Four armchairs constructed from pine lumber (2x4s, 2x6s, 1x4s), fastened with bolts and screws, stained and varnished, and outfitted with foam cushions. The cushion covers can be removed and laundered.

- One short, wide cabinet built from 2x4s and 1/2" plywood.

- One tall, narrow cabinet built from 3/4" pine. Two doors on hinges open in the front.



Grandpa goes to work. All photos courtesy of the author.

The cabinet also opens from above, because the top is completely unattached and can be lifted off entirely—one of Grandpa's little tricks to improve functionality. In this case, it meant my aunt could fit in a stereo that was wider than the opening in the front, while providing access to the stereo's controls via the hinged doors.

- Two outdoor benches, also built from pine lumber. Painted. These are the only two left of the many he built, and they aren't even in his best style.

- Miscellaneous items out in my garage:

- One Craftsman table saw. Grandpa and I came across it at a garage sale in the early 1980s. He fixed it up, built a moveable stand for it, with space under the saw for a cardboard box to catch the sawdust, and he attached the motor using a large hinge so that gravity would keep the belt, running from the motor to the saw blade, snug. I used this saw all the time when I was in late elementary and middle school, when Grandpa was teaching me how to build things out of wood.

- Assorted hand tools, a wheelbarrow, garden hoses, scrap wood.

- One large, heavy, wooden office desk that came from the *Post-Star* (before I was born). Grandpa used it as a workbench in his garage—as do I nowadays, most frequently, when I'm building a fingernail fiddle.

- The wooden stool he used—and that I use—to sit at the workbench—desk.

- Musical instruments:

- Two harmonicas, which I have never played and don't know how to play.

- One mandolin, which I've been playing on and off for almost three decades.

Grandpa loved listening to music—especially to country music legend Hank Williams and plectrum banjo virtuoso Eddie Peabody.

He also desired to make music, and sometimes, acted on that desire.

He had an electric steel guitar. I think he could play a simple chord progression and a few riffs on it, but not much else. For a short while, he'd borrowed a banjo from someone, as well as Peabody's banjo lesson records, but I don't recall his being able to play it. Nor the harmonicas, for that matter.

Grandpa especially loved the mandolin. Not long after he retired, he found an inexpensive

Harmony mandolin, which he thought sounded especially sweet, for sale at a local shop. I'd been teaching myself to play guitar in those days, so I looked over the how-to book that came with the mandolin and showed him a few things to get started. He never got very far.

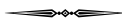
Six or seven years later, I stopped in to see him when I was home from graduate school for a short visit, and I realized that I was able to play a bunch of songs on the mandolin, owing to the fact that it was tuned in fifths, as was the upright fiddle that I was teaching myself to play at the time.

"Why don't *you* take it? *I'll* never use it," Grandpa said.

It's the only mandolin that I've ever owned.

The instrument isn't in great shape anymore, but it still sounds sweet, and I still use it whenever I make homemade recordings of the music I've been writing.

It still helps me get the job done.



I'm looking at all the stuff from Grandpa that I want to put away.

The phrase *generation inflation* enters my mind. I have a fair number of things from my great-grandparents—a handful of photos, tools and tool chests, some books and papers, and a few stories about them. I have many more things from my grandparents—piles of photos, boxes of personal items, lots of crafts, plenty of

furniture, and even Grandma's upright piano. And I have a lot more than that from my parents.

I get to thinking: There's a lot more that my nephews could know about their great-grandparents than I could have known about mine, more photos (and even home movies), which they could view, and more items that they could hold in

their hands. There's also all the stuff from their great-great-grandparents. It probably doesn't all add up to enough to pose a problem yet, but what about for subsequent generations? Will my nephews have grandchildren who will need a warehouse (on the moon?) to store it all?

Another phrase comes to mind—one that I used to hear uttered sarcastically whenever historic preservation threatened to inconvenience a construction project: *hysterical* preservation.

I wonder: what ancestral items are worth hanging onto for merely sentimental reasons? Who and what is worth remembering and why? For how long?

I've got it! I'll create a *digital* scrapbook for my nephews!

How fortunate that the historical expansion of middle-class populations and of all the memories and artifacts they can hang onto has been followed by the emergence of everyday technologies that make it easy to preserve large quantities of documents, photos, newspaper clippings, sound, video, and more, without taking up almost any space at all!

So much for cleaning house—this project suddenly just got a whole lot bigger!

I begin sifting through Grandpa's things and ponder what might be worth digitizing.



I'm looking at an old photo of Grandpa.

He was one in a long line of my ancestors who tended to stay put: My eighth great-grand-



Grandpa making tulips.

father came from England to Block Island, Rhode Island, in the 1600s. After four generations on Block Island, my fourth great-grandfather moved to the greater Glens Falls region, where I live now. In other words, and strictly from a patrilineal perspective, I am part of 12 generations that have essentially lived in only two places on this continent—eight of those generations having lived where I'm living now.

Some reading that I've done suggests that Rhode Island, during the time that my ancestors were there, was the only area in Puritan New England that tolerated Quakers. So, I've speculated that my fourth great-grandfather was a Quaker who moved to this particular area, because it was being settled by Quakers at the time. I do know that Grandpa grew up attending Quaker meetings, as did my father.

Grandpa grew up on the farm belonging to his uncle and stepfather. Grandpa's father, a house carpenter, died soon after Grandpa was born. Grandpa's mother—his father's second cousin—then married one of her deceased husband's brothers, who adopted Grandpa.

Grandpa left school after the eighth grade in order to dedicate more time to working on the farm. By the time he married, he'd left the farm. Most of his adult life was spent working in various paper mills, delivering the *Post-Star* (eventually, he was a district supervisor), and doing local highway maintenance for New York State—mowing Interstate 87 in the summers and plowing Route 9 in the winters. When he thought a particular job had grown intolerable—as he told



Grandpa's Which Craft signs.



Grandpa's jack-o'-lanterns window decoration.

me many times—he'd quit and find another one, even if it meant less pay. It was possible, then, for someone like him to make a decent, lower middle-class living in this way.

Before I was born, Grandpa also had a lettering and sign-painting business on the side. He'd taught himself lettering, using books from a correspondence course. (I still have them.) The family was especially proud that he'd been hired to letter our local school buses, as well as the oil delivery trucks of a prominent local businessman. Grandpa, himself, was visibly proud that he did his lettering freehand, never using any stencils. Once he finished with the business, he continued making signs for friends and relatives whenever they needed them, such as for the craft consignment shop (Which Craft), which my mother and our neighbor once ran.

Which reminds me: I sure wish I had that "painting" of Grandpa's dating back to his lettering days. When I was little, it hung on a wall at the bottom of his cellar stairs, looking like a framed work of modern art.

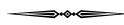
"You know what *that* is, don't ya?" Grandpa would ask me, pausing for effect before explaining.

It was actually the lid of his old paint box. Before cleaning a brush, he would make random brushstrokes on the underside of the open lid to remove excess paint. Before throwing out the paint box, he detached the lid and hung it on

the wall, as though it were abstract art—a white background with layer upon layer of zigzagging brushstrokes in various colors—the "painting" was framed automatically by the pieces of wood that comprised the edges of the paint box's lid.

I can't remember when the "painting" disappeared from the cellar—certainly, before I left for college. He must've taken it to the dump, as he did so many things, whenever he got the urge to clean house. He couldn't have imagined that one day I'd be learning about art in ways that allowed me to view the painting—or if not the painting itself, then certainly, the act of the self-taught sign painter displaying it as such—as a kind of outsider artist's conceptual art.

Or, at least, as something worth hanging onto.



Continuing to sift through Grandpa's things, I find relics of his time in the infantry, after having been drafted to fight in the Second World War. There are the usual army badges and dog tags. There are communiqués announcing his capture by the Germans. There is the identification tag he had to wear as a prisoner of war until the war ended a year later.

I also come across a small photo album that my aunt put together, documenting woodcrafts that Grandpa built and painted during his retirement years, after Grandma had passed away.

Some depict famous cartoon characters while others seem more generic. There are tulips, "old lady" doorbells, rocking horses, swinging horses, a painted Santa Claus and snowman, lawn ladies "bending over," male and female mallard ducks, miscellaneous window items, and an entire town's worth of houses and buildings crafted to accompany a set of HO-scale model trains. All these comprise but a small fraction of what Grandpa made over the years.

The crafts that I have lying around the house today from him and from other relatives—for example, quilted potholders by my grandmother, wine-cork hot mats by my father, a crocheted bedspread by my mother, a yarn-embroidered afghan by my aunt—comprise but a small fraction of the family-made crafts that I've been given. Somewhere around here, I've even got wood- and plastic-canvas crafts that I made when I was a kid.

I grew in a family of crafters, and while I undoubtedly learned something about crafting from everyone, I picked up some overarching crafting sensibilities from Grandpa. These sensibilities include self-study, recycling, and moderation in materials, and they have helped inform how I craft music to go with my rhyming couplets.

1. *Self-study.* I never saw Grandpa teaching himself lettering from books—that was before I was born—but he told me that he'd done so, he showed me the books he used, and he spent time demonstrating to me some of the important techniques he'd learned—all of which set an example for me after the fact.

Except for whatever training I received in required K-7 music classes, a year of piano lessons from Grandma, and an undergraduate course on the philosophy of music, almost everything I've learned about music, I've learned through self-study.

There are some clear drawbacks to teaching yourself music. Mastery in a particular musical tradition probably depends, for most of us, on apprenticing with accomplished masters who can advise us along the way, especially before "bad habits" have set in. Yet, there may be distinct advantages to self-study, including and deriving from, the significant freedom to construct one's own path of learning.

At any rate, when it comes to crafting music for my rhyming couplets, teaching myself has

so far proven to be a self-directed adventure of delightful discovery. And, it has enabled me to get the job done that I've wanted to do.

2. *Recycling*. For years, Grandpa would take me on summertime Saturday mornings to garage sales and the town landfill, in search of free or cheap stuff we could rehabilitate, rebuild, or repurpose—especially bicycles, power tools, furniture, toolboxes, and the like. Sometimes this “obsession”—especially with “the dump”—would lead to some good-natured ribbing by other family members, but Grandpa was always proud of it.

I am likewise unashamed to recycle and re-tool old melodies, in order to craft new music for my rhyming couplets. I think these old tunes have a lot of life left in them and find that approaching music-making as a craft of decomposing—recomposing (or is it *de-re-composing*?) helps me get a particular job done.

Consider, for instance, my first such attempt at crafting my own rhyming-couplet music, by taking melodic excerpts from Robert Lowry’s “Shall We Gather at the River” (1864), and structuring them partly along the lines of folk music from Greece.

The Cretan *syrtos* (plural *syrtas*) is one of several traditional music and dance forms on the island. The “DNA” of a *syrtos* is typically two basic tunes, which I’ll call “A” and “B.” In actual performance, each tune is repeated numerous times as follows:

A-A-...-A-B-B-...-B-A-A-...-A-B-B-...-B

The number of repetitions, and whether there is even a pattern to how many repetitions there are, is up to the performers. Also, performers generally vary the tunes as they repeat them, so that, in practice, A-A-A tends to be more like A-A'-A" and B-B-B tends to be more like B-B'-B". Since this is not fundamentally a written music tradition, there isn't necessarily a clear distinction between “the” tune and “its” variations. As with many fiddling and other such traditions, the question of what a tune’s basic notes are, and what are its embellishments, is to some extent a matter of perception, interpretation, and habit.

A *mantinada* (a rhyming couplet of 15-syllable lines in iambic heptameter) is frequently sung

monophonically (or heterophonically) to the music of a *syrtos*. The first eight syllables of the first line are sung over tune A. The singing itself can be stretched out, so that it takes more than one repetition of tune A to do so, and it can also be extended by interspersing various exclamatory words or phrases and/or by repeating a subset of those eight syllables along the way. Any and all of this can be repeated one or more times (by the same person and/or others singing) over subsequent repetitions of the A tune. Then, when the music finally moves on to tune B, the first eight syllables are typically repeated one more time (but now sung in the B melody), and then the rest of the line’s seven syllables are sung, also with the various optional exclamations and repetitions. The music eventually returns to tune A, and the entire process repeats for the singing of the couplet’s second line.

The same *syrtos* can be repeated more than once (with the same or different numbers of repetitions of the As and Bs, and, if there is singing, with different rhyming couplets). Also, different *syrtas* (each with its own A and B melodies) can be chained together, sort of like a medley.

Using Lowry’s hymn, I crafted two “*syrtas*,” which I called “dragsteps,” since *syrtos* can be approximately translated as *dragged* or *pulled along*. For my first dragstep, I drew on the music of the hymn’s verses to come up with something like the following for tune A.

And this for tune B.

For my second dragstep, I used the same tune B, and I drew on the hymn’s refrain for Tune A. See below.

I paired each dragstep with a rhyming couplet, then chained both together into one “song”:

*I'm skipping stones of misery across the Hudson River,
And counting just how many times she asked me to forgive her.*

*I'm trying not to think of you, but still one memory lingers,
And sticks in both my heart and mind, like pine pitch on my fingers.*

Recycling old tunes like this helps me get the job done.

3. *Moderation in materials*. Grandpa usually built furniture out of 2x4s and plywood—nothing fancy. When he repaired old bicycles (picked up from garage sales or the dump), he refused to bother with the mechanical complexities of 10-speeds; he thought 3-speeds were plenty good enough for the bicycling that most people around town would do.

Similarly, I remain predisposed to a type of moderation in my music-making. For one thing, much of my music tends to draw on hymns, folk songs, and “popular” songs (for example, by Stephen Foster) for its tunes and to use somewhat repetitive forms (such as the dragstep) for its structures. Also, when I make homemade recordings of the music, I mostly use whatever hand-me-down instruments that I already have lying around the house or those that I’ve built myself, inexpensively, out in the garage.

The image contains three musical staves, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff is labeled 'TUNE A' and contains a melody of eight notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4. The second staff is labeled 'TUNE B' and contains a melody of eight notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4. The third staff is labeled 'TUNE A' and contains a melody of eight notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4.



Grandpa's old lady doorbell.

I also practice moderation in harmony. Even as I continue teaching myself more about the complex subject of harmony in Western music, I continue to build my music in ways that refrain from trying to use most of what I'm learning about it. This is not only a matter of personal taste, but also because I've observed how in Cretan traditional music such a practice (in conjunction with other characteristics of the music) seems to increase the likelihood of wider, complex participation among people of different skill levels and talent, when it comes to impromptu music-making, which has the potential for all participants to be profoundly moved.

Moderation in tunes, structures, instruments, and harmony helps me get the job done.



I carry on Grandpa's three-pronged tradition of self-study, recycling, and moderation in materials in order to get the job done.

Or, perhaps, I should say: in order to get the *jobs* done, since crafting music this way has enabled me to address multiple concerns simultaneously, much as Grandpa's paint-box lid served as a way to close the

box itself, as a place to conveniently remove excess paint from his brushes after painting, and as a domestic work and critique of "art."

First, by crafting music inspired by multiple traditions, I am able to respond to my interest in all of the traditions at once.

Second, by crafting music that incorporates some structural elements of Cretan traditional music in a North American context, I can model what I consider to be compelling but not widely understood aspects of that music to people here.

Third, by crafting this kind of music, instead of participating in other more locally established genres or traditions, I can attempt, by example, a critique of music-making in modernity in general, especially in relation to such issues as participatory versus presentational music; copyright, public domain, and the commons; as well as music as language.

Come to think of it—and speaking of *generation inflation*—Grandpa and I seem to share a fourth crafting sensibility: *repetition!*

Grandpa often repeated the making of a given craft many times over, but always trying out little variations. This was especially evident with all the small houses and buildings he created to go with the model trains he'd found at garage sales.

One building at a time—using scrap wood, leftover paint, and scraps of my aunt's plastic canvas that otherwise would have been thrown out—Grandpa eventually filled the largest room of his cellar with a version of our hometown and other nearby areas or landmarks that he found especially meaningful. In his version of our town, though, there wasn't only a miniature version of the *actual* appliance store run by his niece and her husband, of the *actual* farm store run by another one of his nieces and her husband, of the *actual* post office, of the *actual* hardware store, of the *actual* village fire department, and even of the construction company that my brother seemed *destined* to own or work for—there was also a miniature version of *my diner!*

Really? A diner?

Sure, when I was a little kid, I sometimes talked about owning a restaurant when I grew up, and Grandpa knew that I liked to

cook. He also knew, though, that I'd gone off to college to study "computers"—a passion throughout my junior high and high school years, infinitely greater than any I'd ever had for cooking. He surely knew, too, that I was on the verge of finishing a degree in mathematics and planning to head to graduate school for more education. And, I'm certain that he never doubted the likelihood of my being successful in whatever profession my studies were preparing me for. I can only think that the restaurant business was the one profession for me that he was in a position to make sense of or relate to, and that it signified his hope that I would someday *come back here* to live and work.

I'm no psychoanalyst, but I can't help but wonder if his creating an elaborate parallel universe of our hometown was largely a matter of wish fulfillment. If so, perhaps, it had something to do with a desire not only to be geographically closer to his grandson but also to protect his grandson from the harsh world "out there."

I can only imagine the disconnect between his having grown up on a small farm in rural Washington County in the 1920s and 1930s—not to mention as a member of the



Grandpa's swingers and dogs.



Grandpa's train world.

pacifism-embracing Society of Friends—and the nature and scale of the violence that he experienced during the Second World War. As near as I can tell, our hometown treated him well in life. It must have seemed to him to be a more or less ideal model of what he thought the world should be like. If only he could protect his grandson from succumbing to the rest of the world's siren songs!

Which brings me to this question: What about the fact that, through music, *I, too, am crafting a parallel universe of our area?*

I realized early that I could, for colleagues, succinctly contextualize the music I'd been crafting, by describing it as the traditional music of a region of northern New York in a parallel universe, where music-making is centered around a remarkably vibrant practice of versifying in the form of rhyming couplets. Soon, I was imagining different scenarios and characters in this parallel universe and crafting rhyming couplets that I envisioned these characters singing or improvising together there.

Grandpa and I both seemed to be crafting comforting versions of a parallel universe to our hometown region by repeatedly crafting its constituent parts—in his case, houses and buildings, and in my case, rhyming couplets and tunes to go with them. Some might even say that, following Freud, our behavior looked suspiciously compulsive in its repetition, and that such repetition was about getting a job done in the unconscious—the job

of managing the respective traumas of our lives.

Yet, a different interpretation comes to my mind in light of a critique of Freud, discussed by Eugene Holland in a chapter on “Jazz Improvisation: Music of the People-to-Come.” In his view, repetition is not always a “reparative reaction to trauma, a compulsive repetition of the same”—rather, sometimes it is “a creative response to some of life's little complexities” and a “chance to hazard an improvisation” (O'Sullivan and Zepke 2008, 201).²

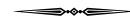
This view recognizes not only the comforting, familiar aspect of “home,” which results from, or is reinforced by, specific repetitive acts, but also the ways that little differences in the repetitions—houses of different sizes or colors, or variations A, A', and A'' in a song—are improvisations: “*leaving* home (homes of many kinds) on the thread of a tune” (O'Sullivan and Zepke 2008, 201, my emphasis). From this perspective, Grandpa and I neither give up on our “home” (or on our hometown), nor give in to it—we both imagine what else it might become in the very process of our (re-)modeling it.

And can't something similar be said about the repetition of repetitions (as in the tunes of a dragstep)? Of traditions through generations? My repetitive crafting of rhyming couplets and tunes of my parallel universe repeats Grandpa's repetitive crafting of houses and buildings of his parallel universe.

My doing so with certain crafting sensibilities repeats Grandpa's having done so with similar sensibilities. In such cross-generational repetition lies both the continuation of tradition—of self-teaching, of recycling, of moderation in materials—but also its reinterpretation in ever changing historical contexts.

This is how a subsequent generation takes another *step*—risks an improvisation—but always facing the possibility that, in so doing, history might just keep *dragging* its feet when it comes to some of the things that matter to us most.

Perhaps, now I understand a little better why we should *refrain* from claiming that we humans are doomed to repeat history, and learn to ask, instead, what is at stake when we repeat history with this or that difference.



I decide to abandon the idea of creating a digital scrapbook for my nephews. I conclude provisionally that worrying about generation inflation may be less important than thinking more about my criteria for deciding what to save and what to take to the dump.

I finish crafting the music that, in performance, will repeat the tunes I've extracted from Lomax's transcription of cowboy songs.

Like Grandpa finishing the third of three jack-o-lanterns made for display in a reflective window, I complete this third and final essay of *Homemade Music: A Family Tree*—I finish *this* scrapbook.

And I wonder what difference it might make. ▼

Notes:

¹ Rhyming couplets and original music appearing in this essay © Eric L. Ball.

² O'Sullivan, Simon, and Stephen Zepke, eds. 2008. *Deleuze, Guattari, and the Production of the New*. London: Continuum.

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