

# **George Caleb Bingham's river paintings revisited: Music and dance in *The Jolly Floatboatmen***

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# George Caleb Bingham's River Paintings Revisited: Music and Dance in *The Jolly Flatboatmen*

*Annett Richter*

George Caleb Bingham (1811-79), American local genre painter of Missouri men and manners, wrote in 1871 that art is "the most efficient hand-maid of history" because it possesses the "power to perpetuate a record of events with a clearness second only to that which springs from actual observation."<sup>1</sup>

*The Jolly Flatboatmen* depicts a moment of a period in American history when the presence of large flat rafts and keelboats marked a milestone in the development of transportation at the frontier. Bingham's painting presents a lively portrayal of a group of rivermen on a flatboat moving along the Mississippi river. The 1846 version (see Plate 1) shows eight men on a raft, the central figure engaged in a dance. Bingham captured a moment of relaxation in the life of Missouri boatmen - a recurring subject matter which he had the opportunity to observe frequently in real life.<sup>2</sup>

The artist, today best remembered as

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I wish to thank Wolf Kindermann, Karal Ann Marling and Peter Mercer-Taylor for their invaluable comments and suggestions on various drafts of this article.

<sup>1</sup> John Francis McDermott, *George Caleb Bingham River Portraitist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), 170.

<sup>2</sup> *Bingham's Missouri* (Jefferson City: Missouri State Council on the Arts, 1975), unpaginated.

America's genre painter of the state of Missouri, probably had his first contact with life on the shore of the Missouri river in the booming town of Franklin, Missouri. We know from documents that Bingham's family had moved there during his childhood.<sup>3</sup> During the early years of his career, the artist traveled across Missouri by steamboat, making a living from portrait business.<sup>4</sup> Later, he maintained various studios in St. Louis that were located near the Mississippi river.<sup>5</sup> Surrounded by scenes of everyday life here, Bingham was involved in a direct observation of the activities and traits of fur traders, fishermen, and boatmen that served as models for his river paintings.

In the past, historians and art historians have discussed Bingham's river scenes within his overall output and in social, historical, and political contexts.<sup>6</sup> These paintings have come to be read as the artist's personal expression of the spirit and the economic significance of Western settlement and civilization in nineteenth-century America. While it has been valuable to interpret them as Bingham's definition of

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<sup>3</sup> *Bingham's Missouri*.

<sup>4</sup> *Bingham's Missouri*.

<sup>5</sup> The painter rented studio space "in the vicinity of Main and Market Streets," a part of St. Louis that was two blocks away from the river (Ibid.).

<sup>6</sup> See John Demos, "George Caleb Bingham: The Artist as a Social Historian," *American Quarterly* 17 (Summer 1965): 218-28; Barbara S. Groseclose, "Painting, Politics, and George Caleb Bingham," *American Art Journal* 10 (Nov 1978): 5-19; McDermott, *George Caleb Bingham River Portraitist*, 56-9; Alan Trachtenberg, "Contesting the West," *Art in America* 79 (Sept 1991): 118-23, 152; and William H. Truettner, "Reinterpreting Images of Westward Expansion, 1820-1920," *The Magazine Antiques* 139 (1991): 542-55.

nationalism in the age of westward expansion, the documenting of contemporary folklore in his *Jolly Flatboatmen* deserves more scholarly attention from a musicological point of view. As the only paintings showing music and dance, the three versions of *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1846, 1857, and 1877/78) stand out in the artist's overall output. By treating this theme repeatedly, Bingham conveys that these events were not just a pastime but that they defined musical traditions in the West. This paper examines how Bingham's *Jolly Flatboatmen* creates an authentic visual account of music-making at America's frontier. Drawing upon iconographical analysis, this study explores what kind of music and dance may have been represented here and casts light on the socio-cultural context for a musical practice that contributed to the shaping of nineteenth-century folklore in America.

The close-up presentation of the flatboat implies the placement of the viewer on the water, conveying a strong immediacy of the lively scene that is portrayed in an extremely compressed space. This compression causes a flatness in the painting which is resolved into perspective by the two boatmen sitting at the rear end of the raft. The movement of the boat points into the beholder's space. Four of the eight rivermen acknowledge our gaze by looking out of the picture directly at us: "We, the audience, as well as the artist and the whole 'town-life' that [Bingham] represents, are almost as much an object of curiosity to *them* as they are to us. Thus they return our stare. [original italics]"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Demos, "George Caleb Bingham," 224. Demos states that the artist particularly emphasized the facial expression of his

The boat crew is presented in front of a cloudless sky in Missouri where Bingham spent the first half of his life. It was in this region where the painter encountered his democratic heroes of the American West. In *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, the dancer's red, white, and blue clothing encodes Bingham's statement of nationalism. These colors are dramatically set against the white sky in front of indistinct outlines of distant water and trees.

Americans regarded flatboatmen as an ambiguous type of people. They were associated with western rivers during the decades preceding the Civil War.<sup>8</sup> Eastern audiences mainly based their attitude towards rivermen on engravings with the same

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rivermen in the three versions of *The Jolly Flatboatmen* which gaze in an inquiring manner "as if Bingham had come up behind these people as unobtrusively as possible." (Ibid.) Even though the artist deeply familiarized himself with the customs and traits of this particular type of American society, the portrayed characters live in a world different from Bingham's, a world which could not be shared between the two. Contemporary accounts in Missouri newspapers referred to the Western boatmen as a "peculiar class" with regard to their habits, manners and clothing. (McDermott, *George Caleb Bingham River Portraitist*, 62.)

<sup>8</sup> Michael Edward Shapiro, *George Caleb Bingham* (New York: H.M. Abrams, 1993), p. 51 claims that boatmen had often been described "as a boisterous, vulgar lot." They were young and unattached people working on rafts which transported raw materials downstream to markets such as St. Louis and New Orleans. A nineteenth-century traveler wrote that "the manners of the boatmen are as strange as their language. Their peculiar way of life has given origin not only to an appropriate dialect, but to new modes of enjoyment, riot, and fighting." (Ina Faye Woestemeyer, *The Westward Movement: A Book of Readings on our Changing Frontiers* [New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1939], 334.)

subject matter made from paintings.<sup>9</sup> In their eyes, boatmen had the reputation of having “removed themselves from ordinary social structures.”<sup>10</sup> They were believed to lead a life associated with “roughhousing, carefree idleness on the job, and drunken revelry on shore.”<sup>11</sup> Bingham, however, offered a western point of view: “These young men . . . may be interested in fun, but they are not disreputable.”<sup>12</sup> He encouraged Easterners to view them as clever and progressive citizens who were ready to push the frontier and Western settlement forward. “Bingham acknowledges their individuality and their toughness, but he also elevates them to the position of ancient river gods, guardians of commerce.”<sup>13</sup> For the artist, these flatboatmen stood for the advancement of America’s economy. Thus, Bingham was determined to depict their lifestyle in the West as one that was typically American. His figures were part of his definition of a national class. Furthermore, the artist was an advocate for the westerner’s view of the boatman in a naturally relaxed position, placed in a safe and peaceful environment.

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<sup>9</sup> Bingham submitted *The Jolly Flatboatmen* to the American Art Union in 1846 after which a black-and-white engraving was made the following year by Thomas Doney in New York for distribution to the Union’s membership. More importantly, it was Bingham’s aim with his painting to introduce the reality of Western settlement to audiences in the East. See McDermott, “George Caleb Bingham and the American Art-Union,” *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 42 (Jan 1958): 61, 64; and Shapiro, *George Caleb Bingham*, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 84.

<sup>11</sup> Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life*, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life*, 85.

<sup>13</sup> Shapiro, *George Caleb Bingham*, 51-52.

Not only was Bingham familiar with everyday life scenes of rivermen but also with how this type of citizenry preserved music as part of the culture at the frontier. Travel accounts of the time disclose that dancing and fiddle playing were frequent activities in the life of flatboatmen. Americans who visited the West in the 1830s observed the particular appearance of boat crews on the Mississippi in vivid and picturesque terms. Reverend Timothy Flint, for example, who extensively journeyed through the Mississippi Valley, wrote the following:

All the toil, and danger, and exposure, and moving accidents of this long and perilous voyage, are hidden, however, from the inhabitants, who contemplate the boats floating by their dwellings on beautiful spring mornings, when the verdant forest, the mild and delicious temperature of the air, the delightful azure of the sky of this country, . . . the broad and smooth stream rolling calmly down the forest, and floating the boat gently forward, present delightful images and associations to the beholders. At this time, there is no visible danger, or call for labor. The boat takes care of itself; and little do the beholders imagine, how different a scene may be presented in half an hour. Meantime, one of the hands scrapes a violin, and the others dance . . . These scenes, and these notes, . . . present the image of a tempting and charming youthful existence, that naturally inspires a wish to be a boatman.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to music-making on rafts and boats, it was

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<sup>14</sup> Timothy Flint, *The History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley* (Cincinnati: E. H. Flint, 1833), 1:157.

also at the shore of river towns where boatmen found time for talking, joking, dancing and fiddling, storytelling, card-playing, and whisky-drinking while the boats waited for their freight to be loaded onto larger steamboats. Flint reports: "Almost every boat, while it lies in the harbor, has one or more fiddles scraping continually on board, to which you often see the boatmen dancing."<sup>15</sup>

In the 1846 version of *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, originally entitled *Dance on the Flat Boat*, the liveliness of some rivermen and the seemingly relaxed poses of others enable us to hear the sound of the young man tapping on a tin pan or a skillet, the scratchy music of a country fiddle, and the finger snaps and heel-kicking of the dancer. The peaceful silence of the river seems to be suddenly broken by the musical scene in the painting. Its lively rhythm is defined by the fiddler's foot-tapping, a gesture that reminds us of musicians performing at American square and country dances in the nineteenth-century. The tempo of the music provided for such occasions was always set and maintained by the fiddler.<sup>16</sup>

Prior to Bingham, the theme of music and dance had been treated by William Sidney Mount (1807-1868) in works depicting rustic scenes in the life of American farmers in the East. The Missouri artist was familiar with Mount's enormously popular genre paintings of rural Long Island from lithographic prints that were distributed among American and

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Demos, "George Caleb Bingham," 225. See also Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, and Co., 1826), 14-18.

<sup>16</sup> Louie Attebery, "The Fiddle Tune: An American Artifact," *Northwest Folklore* 2/2 (1967): 28.

European audiences.<sup>17</sup> E. Maurice Bloch has suggested that “Mount’s *Dance of the Haymakers . . .*, sometimes alternatively titled *Music is Contagious*, comes closest to serving as a pendant to *The Jolly Flatboatmen*. The intimate glimpse of farmers enjoying a moment of relaxation after a day’s toil - two of them dancing while another plays the fiddle - appears almost identical in mood and action to the flatboatmen.”<sup>18</sup>

In their paintings, both artists draw upon members of marginal groups of nineteenth-century

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Edward Shapiro, “George Caleb Bingham,” *The Magazine Antiques* 138 (July 1990) mentions on p. 146 that Bingham encountered the “portraits of Thomas Sully and Gilbert Stuart, the genre paintings of William Sidney Mount, and the landscapes of Thomas Cole” during a visit to Philadelphia and New York in 1838. Mount’s *Dance After a Sleigh Ride* (1830), *Dancing on the Barn Floor* (1831), *Dance of the Haymakers* (1845), and *The Power of Music* (1845) are exemplifying works of the artist’s treatment of music and dance. An active amateur fiddler and flautist as well as a collector of violin tunes himself, Mount’s most frequently depicted musical instrument became the fiddle, an instrument in increasing demand for the performance of music at country dances and square dances on Long Island in the nineteenth-century.

<sup>18</sup> E. Maurice Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham: The Evolution of an Artist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 1:91. Mount’s *Dance of the Haymakers* had been exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1845. The latter painting and *The Power of Music* were available as lithographs in 1849 and 1848, respectively, and were distributed in the United States and internationally by William Schaus, an American agent of the Parisian Goupil, Vibert and Company. See Martha V. Pike, “Catching the Tune: Music and William Sidney Mount,” in *Catching the Tune: Music and William Sidney Mount*, ed. Janice Gray Armstrong (Stony Brook, NY: The Museums at Stony Brook, 1984), 12.

American society. Bingham's choice of western rivermen indirectly corresponds to Mount's treatment of African Americans as character types that lack deeper roots in a society dominated by whites. Mount places people of color into scenes that idealize the peaceful coexistence between both communities. Bingham similarly captures his river heroes at moments of ease in the hope to inspire audiences in the East towards a more positive attitude to the class of western boatmen, townspeople and settlers. After all, they, too, took part in forming the country's national identity.

Michael Edward Shapiro has claimed that "[Bingham's] drawings allowed him to build an inventory of rural characters in stylized, often classical, poses, which became the building blocks of his finished paintings."<sup>19</sup> Bingham's sketched figures reveal a strong resemblance to the characters in his genre paintings. Among them, several types of people can be identified in their common postures, clothing and facial expressions, representing different layers of American society. The happy dancing figure with his up-flung arms in *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, for example, can be found in *The County Election* (1851/52) and *The Verdict of the People* (1854/55). Upon comparison of the three versions of *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, it becomes apparent that the fiddler himself, despite slight changes in his posture, is also a recurring figure in Bingham's paintings.

It is unfortunate that the dancing figure of the 1846 version is not included in the artist's sketchbook. Its origin may reside in William Sidney

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<sup>19</sup> Shapiro, "George Caleb Bingham," 146.

Mount's *Farmers Nooning* (1836) from which Bingham borrowed the pose of the African American slave resting on a haystack. Both figures have their arms raised, yet they are engaged in completely different activities. Two characters from contrasting social backgrounds take up the center of each composition.<sup>20</sup> If there is a similarity between Bingham's and Mount's dancing figures, it is perhaps *The Dance of the Haymakers* (1845, see Plate 2) that reflects the idea of "borrowing" more convincingly, particularly so since here, Mount also treats the theme of music and dance.

The dancer of Bingham's *Jolly Flatboatmen in Port* (1857, see Plate 3) is part of a composition that marks the artist's transition from his earlier genre painting style to a later, more mature and developed style.<sup>21</sup> The artist "reveals [his] continuing observation

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), p. 153 compares Bingham's characters to Mount's and claims that the first constructs figures that are restricted in movement due to a predominant "geometric structure." In contrast, Mount's characters have the freedom "to move with the organic ease of the Dutch seventeenth-century genre tradition." Bingham's "conceptually conceived" rivermen in *The Jolly Flatboatmen* certainly appear to be less flexible in their individual movements even though the scene as such portrays activities that involve motion. This is because Bingham, in the 1846 version, uses a classical triangle in a relatively strict and traditional composition. In the Düsseldorf version of 1857, this structural stiffness loosens up and becomes much more complex due to a shift in angle and perspective.

<sup>21</sup> *The Jolly Flatboatmen in Port* is off-center in composition, has more supporting figures than the earlier version, and opens up the view to the distance rather than blocking it. Out of all three *Jolly Flatboatmen* paintings, it appears to be the one painted in

and use of [an] antique model, in this instance paralleling [the] pose and movement [of the] Hellenistic figure of a dancing satyr.”<sup>22</sup> Bloch has pointed out that “this classical figure was actually well known in small-scale reproductions which must have ornamented many a parlor in Bingham’s time.”<sup>23</sup> The *Dancing Satyr* is half animal, and is the kind of figure that stands outside the bounds of polite society. This sculpture exhibits more similarities to Bingham’s dancer than to Mount’s African American in *Farmers Nooning* whose arms seem to be merely raised in a pose of relaxation and rest. In addition, the *Dancing Satyr* is actually involved in the same kind of activity as Bingham’s central figure, a dance.

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Düsseldorf that scholars usually describe as “large, overcrowded with figures, and dull in coloring.” (Fern Rusk Shapley, “Bingham’s ‘Jolly Flatboatmen,’” *Art Quarterly* 17 (1954): 355). Shapiro interprets this work as a “grand statement . . . [which] updated the river paintings to more accurately depict antebellum Saint Louis” (Shapiro, *George Caleb Bingham*, 120). McDermott, however, argues that, compared to the 1846 version, “the composition and the tone of the picture [of 1857] have been greatly altered, though not for the better.” (McDermott, “Jolly Flatboatmen: Bingham and His Imitators,” *Antiques* 73 (March 1958): 269.) Scholars have voiced disagreement about the geographical location of the river port in the 1857 version. See Marquis W. Childs, “George Caleb Bingham,” *American Magazine of Art* 27 (1934): 598; McDermott, “Jolly Flatboatmen: Bingham and His Imitators,” 269; Shapiro, *George Caleb Bingham*, 118-20; and May Simonds, “A Pioneer Painter,” *The American Illustrated Methodist Magazine* 8/2 (Oct 1902): 76. Between the Missouri and the Mississippi as possibilities, the latter seems to be a reasonable inference. Bingham rented several studios near the shore of the Mississippi in St. Louis during his career.

<sup>22</sup> Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham*, 1:93-94.

<sup>23</sup> Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham*, 94. For a reproduction of the *Dancing Satyr*, see Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham*, 1: plate 57.

The dancing figure in *The Jolly Flatboatmen* of 1846 contributes to the musical rhythm of the painting not only with the movement of his feet but also with his finger snaps. The riverman here seems to be much more involved in the activity of the dance itself. He is focused on his own feet and of those of the fiddler, moving his legs to the rhythm of the pan. In comparison to the graceful and elegant steps of Mount's *Haymakers*, the motion of the tall riverman's body with up-flung and widely spread raised arms seems to make the loud stepping and jumping on the shallow boat surface easily audible. In fact, the viewer is inspired to imagine the actual vibration and resonance the steps cause on the wood. *The Jolly Flatboatmen* of 1857 and 1877/78 (see Plate 4) dispense with the idea of the dancer partaking in the music-making with finger snaps. Instead, Bingham equips him with a red-colored handkerchief in his right and a brown hat in his left hand.<sup>24</sup> Here, the artist lets his dancer return the viewer's gaze, as if to represent a public performance. The production of melody and rhythm is entirely left to the fiddler and the skillet player. The stylized and elegant posture of the dancer's upper body and his legs resembles Mount's dancers and the Hellenistic sculpture much more closely. The "borrowed" and conceptualized dancer in the 1857 and 1877/78 versions, however,

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<sup>24</sup> The motif of the handkerchief which releases the tension of the pyramidal group in *The Jolly Flatboatmen* can be found in Jean-Louis Theodore Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1818/19), "a painting Bingham could conceivably have known through engraved reproduction." (See Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham*, 1: p. 94, and plate 58.) Furthermore, the artist could have seen this painting during a two month stay in Paris in 1856 from where the artist and his family moved to Düsseldorf, Germany.

appears to be less convincing in his image as a flatboatman at the American frontier, but perhaps more European instead.

Bingham's choice and the distribution of the color scheme of red, white, and blue are brought to the fore much more distinctly in the last *Jolly Flatboatmen*. Particularly striking is the way in which the colors of the dancer balance with and are reflected in the attire of the rest of the boatmen. Each figure is an integrated part of the color scheme and part of the distinctively American character of the frontier expressed in the clothing of the rivermen, the geographical location, and, last but not least, the musical activity.

Scholars have identified the dance in all three *Jolly Flatboatmen* as a jig or hoe-down without presenting justification.<sup>25</sup> What Bingham happened to capture here is only one single step, i.e. one particular moment, of an entire dance. In all three works, the dancer has raised one foot several inches above ground whereas the other foot touches the surface of the wood with the tip of the boot. This position implies that he is performing some kind of stepping or hopping that involves an alternating movement between both the right and the left foot. The dancer in the last two *Jolly Flatboatmen* is placed in perspective, revealing a certain degree of gracefulness in his posture. Considering that this figure is influenced by the Hellenistic *Dancing Satyr*, a figure unlikely to dance a jig, the presentation of plausible evidence toward a specific dance in the painting is difficult.

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<sup>25</sup> See *Bingham's Missouri*; Childs, "George Caleb Bingham," 598; and Shapiro, *George Caleb Bingham*, 118, caption.

As opposed to round and group dances that were part of life in Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the jig, like the reel and the hornpipe, comprised solo or step dances which characterized the "height of perfection" in Irish dancing.<sup>26</sup> During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, itinerant dancing masters were largely responsible for the cultivation and teaching of these dances in Ireland.<sup>27</sup>

Each dancing master had his own collection of parishes and townlands which he visited, and the dancing masters respected each other's territory . . . The dancing master would put up in the house of a local farmer . . . He took his pupils as he found them, the usual mixed bag of the naturally gifted and the 'two left feet variety' of dancer. The basic steps taught to the dancers [in Ireland] were the jig and [the] reel. Within each dance, stamping, shuffling, grinding, and skipping and hopping steps were [performed].<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to Bingham's solo dancer in all three *Jolly Flatboatmen*, the jig was danced "usually by one couple, but the number was not restricted."<sup>29</sup> The raised arms of Bingham's dancers do not correspond to the authentic description of a jig, for Irish step dancing in general does not involve any movement of the body above the hips:

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<sup>26</sup> Breandán Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1977), 43.

<sup>27</sup> Nuala O'Connor, *Bringing It All Back Home: The Influence of Irish Music* (London: BBC Books, 1991), 64-5.

<sup>28</sup> O'Connor, *Bringing It All Back Home* . . . , 64-5

<sup>29</sup> Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances*, 43.

A remarkable feature of step dancing was the control or restraint which underlay the vigour and speed of the performance. The good dancer kept the body rigid, moving only from the hips down and with arms extended straight at the side. This restrained type of dancing was apparently the ideal of the dancing masters who discouraged flinging the hands about, or flourishing them at the level of the head.<sup>30</sup>

It is unknown to what extent the painter was familiar with dances from the British Isles. Breandán Breathnach informs us that "the good dancer danced, as it were, underneath himself, trapping each note of the music on the floor, and the use of the half door and table for solo performances indicates the limited area in which he was expected to perform the elaborate and intricate steps."<sup>31</sup> Perhaps Bingham, then, intended the characteristics of the dance to be portrayed merely in the figure's steps and footwork.

Even though the body posture pertaining to a jig does not entirely coincide with the dance in *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, instructions for it yield some similarities between the painting and the steps described in the rules. The jig exists in various forms, depending on the rhythm of the music per measure: the common or double jig, the single jig, and the hop or slip jig. The double jig was to be performed as follows:<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances*, 53.

<sup>31</sup> Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances*, 53-54.

<sup>32</sup> The jig, the oldest form of extant Irish dance music, is generally a lively dance in a triple meter which holds true for the

It commences with the 'rising step,' the first step the learner is taught. One form of this step is performed by throwing the right foot forward about twelve inches above the floor, hopping on the left, while the right is withdrawn to tap the floor, and then tapping with the left, right, and left foot. This action, occupying one bar of the tune, is repeated three times. To the fourth or last bar of the phrase the boy performed the *grinding step* on his left foot, the girl the *shuffle*. [original italics] Grinding is performed by striking the floor with the toes of each foot alternately in time to the six notes in the bar, shuffling by giving each foot alternately a light shuffling motion in front of the other.<sup>33</sup>

Bingham is unlikely to have portrayed a slip jig since this form involves light hopping, tripping and sliding. Furthermore, it was usually danced by two couples.<sup>34</sup> The double and the single jig, however, could conceivably have been dance steps the artist had in mind here. The alternating movement between the right and left foot can clearly be recognized in the painting. Given the process of assimilation through which Irish dancing went after its introduction to the United States, it is possible that the raised arms of Bingham's dancers represent an American adaptation

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double jig (in 6/8 time with six eighth notes per measure), the single jig (in 6/8 and occasionally in 12/8 time with every quarter note followed by an eighth note), and the hop or slip jig (in 9/8 time with various groupings of triplets of eighth notes, quarter notes and eighth notes, and dotted quarter notes). (Ibid, 57-59.)

<sup>33</sup> Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances*, 43.

<sup>34</sup> Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances*, 45.

of a single or double jig.

In Bingham's world, women did not belong to the part of society that was adventurous enough to explore the unsettled areas of the American West on boats and rafts. It would therefore have been unusual to paint a dancing couple that included a female figure. After all, *The Jolly Flatboatmen* were intended to depict moments in the life of a male world in which dancing was most likely not considered a useful social skill but rather a casual activity that distracted from the daily routine of transporting and unloading commodities.

The musical content of the painting is embedded in mid-nineteenth-century America whose culture absorbed folk music traditions transmitted by emigrants from the British Isles. Immigrants who came to the United States in increasing numbers in the 1830s and 1840s due to the Famine and depriving economic conditions in their homeland were mostly peasants from rural areas of Ireland.<sup>35</sup> Arriving in a country with an expanded range of economic opportunities, Irish immigrants adapted their cultural and musical heritage to an urban environment.<sup>36</sup> In

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<sup>35</sup> Lawrence McCullough, "A Historical Sketch of Traditional Irish Music in the U.S.," *Folklore Forum* 7/3 (July 1974): 179.

<sup>36</sup> According to McCullough, "A Historical Sketch," the first traditional Irish music in the United States may have been played on the fiddle, the instrument of Irish peasantry. It had become a more acknowledged instrument as musical practices of the Irish aristocracy and their instrument, the harp, began to vanish (p. 179). For further discussion of the significance of the fiddle, see also Michael Broyles, "Immigrant, Folk, and Regional Musics in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Cambridge History of American Music*, ed. David Nicholls (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 136-41.

addition, the fiddle, compared to instruments such as the uilleann pipes, was light in weight and easy to transport from overseas. It opened the door for music from the British Isles to find its way into American culture. This assimilation process affected Irish music and dance in that it offered lucrative performance venues for amateurs and professionals: "Traditional Irish musicians and dancers moved smoothly into the popular American entertainment milieu of the time and were frequently employed as performers on riverboats and on pleasure cruises, in hotels, saloons, dance halls, and theaters."<sup>37</sup> To itinerant musicians in Ireland who were associated with a lower-class social status, America undoubtedly represented an economic attraction.

Not only did professional Irish-American musicians showcase Irish music in performance, but they also played music for a variety of dances - among others quadrilles, cotillions, strathspeys, and schottisches - some of which came to be ancestors of the American square dance.<sup>38</sup> The fiddle was the most popular instrument for the performer of dances.

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<sup>37</sup> McCullough, "Historical Sketch," 180. Due to the lack of documents and sources, scholars of Irish folk music have found it challenging to define the musical traditions of Irish immigrants that arrived in America before the nineteenth-century. What is presently considered as "traditional Irish music" is the musical heritage that originated in Ireland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

<sup>38</sup> Attebery, "The Fiddle Tune," 24. The author claims on p. 22 that the American fiddle tune and the square dance flourished in particular at the American frontier. This environment provided an ideal setting for these forms of entertainment to thrive and to turn into ingrained parts of American culture. Both artifacts played an important role in fostering entertainment in the mid-nineteenth century, especially since they were "home made."

According to Michael Broyles, "in rural areas a single fiddler frequently provided music for [these events].<sup>39</sup> Depending on availability, the fiddle's melody was accompanied by other fiddles, a drum, a banjo, a guitar, a mandolin and an accordion, or any combinations thereof.<sup>40</sup> It was customary to repeat fiddle tunes as often as desired since the last phrase of each one led naturally to the beginning of another. Traditional fiddlers learned to play the style and the instrument's repertoire by ear while playing tunes "mostly for enjoyment of dancers and listeners in their own region, community, and family."<sup>41</sup>

An inscription in Mount's own hand on the 1849 lithograph of the *Dance of the Haymakers* offers a glimpse of the kind of fiddle music that was popular in mid-nineteenth-century America.<sup>42</sup> The artist transcribed the music for a "Hornpipe" by Shepard S. Jones, a popular contemporary fiddler, on the back of the print.<sup>43</sup> This would suggest that Mount was very familiar with both the stylistic traits of this music and the dance steps for a hornpipe. If the painter implies a connection here between Jones's fiddle tune and the barn dance portrayed in *Dance of the Haymakers*, it would indeed depict hornpipe dance steps, and not a jig as suggested elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Mount's

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<sup>39</sup> Broyles, "Immigrant, Folk, and Regional Musics," 141.

<sup>40</sup> Howard Wight Marshall, "The Place of Traditional Fiddling in Midwestern Culture," *The Devil's Box* 22/3 (Fall 1988): 43.

<sup>41</sup> Marshall, "The Place of Traditional Fiddling in Midwestern Culture," 42.

<sup>42</sup> This particular lithograph is owned by The Museums of Stony Brook at Stony Brook, New York.

<sup>43</sup> Pike, "Catching the Tune," 12.

<sup>44</sup> Alan C. Buechner, "William Sidney Mount's 'Cradle of Harmony': A Unique 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Violin," *Journal of*

dance steps show some similarities to the dancer's footwork and the position of their legs in Bingham's *Jolly Flatboatmen* of 1857 and 1877/78.

Hornpipes, polkas, jigs, reels, and other dance tunes from the British Isles comprised a large part of the fiddle repertoire at this time. Broyles has pointed out that "the three most common dances in America at the beginning of the nineteenth-century were the reel, the jig, and the hornpipe."<sup>45</sup> They were performed at social dances and for entertainment on riverboats. The dissemination of fiddle music frequently occurred through observation of other fiddlers playing and the imitation of their tunes. In addition, with the beginning of the eighteenth century, Irish songs and dances were available in printed anthologies of instrumental and vocal music.<sup>46</sup>

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*the Vidin Society of America* 3/2 (1977) claims on p. 41 that the two farmers in the *Dance of the Haymakers* are performing a jig. Unfortunately, it remains unsaid how the author arrived at this conclusion.

<sup>45</sup> Broyles, "Immigrant, Folk, and Regional Musics," 141.

<sup>46</sup> Broyles, "Immigrant, Folk, and Regional Musics," 138. Other examples of nineteenth-century dance tune collections for fiddle include Elias Howe's *The Musician's Companion* (1840) and Sydney Ryan's *Mammoth Collection of 1050 Jigs and Reels* (1883). For more nineteenth and twentieth-century publication titles, see Alan Lomax, *American Folk Song and Folk Lore: A Regional Bibliography* (New York: P. E. A. Service Center, 1942), 43-46. In addition, Mount's own output in collecting, transcribing and composing approximately 450 fiddle tunes, including waltzes, polkas, jigs, and reels, has been catalogued by The Museums of Stony Brook, New York (Pike, "Catching the Tune," p. 21, n. 2). Another collection of manuscript fiddle music exists by Isaac Homan, a contemporary of Mount. It contains a similarly wide variety of tunes and is held at the Bellport-Brookhaven Historical Society in Bellport, New York.

Ira Ford's *Traditional Music of America*, a wide-ranging collection of fiddle tunes published in 1940, gives us an idea of what we might have "heard" in a painting like Bingham's *Jolly Flatboatmen*.

Jigs, reels, hornpipes, and other dances from the British Isles are melodically simple, lighthearted, and rhythmically driving. They are usually in major keys and in binary form in which each half is repeated. Both sections can be melodically related to each other. Each part consists of an eight-measure strain in which the downbeats function as a coordinator between the meter of the music and the order of the dance steps. Whereas jigs are usually in fast compound meter (6/8) and have a comparatively bouncy rhythm derived from a quarter note followed by an eighth-note (see Plate 5, *A cross the River*), reels are in duple time (2/4, 4/4, or 2/2) and exhibit "relatively even accents in [each] measure."<sup>47</sup> Brief cadences in reels (see Plate 5, *McLæd's Reel*) and the subdivision of the eighth-note beat (see Plate 5, *Tennessee Reel*) imbue the dance with an "effect of relatively continuous running motion."<sup>48</sup> These characteristics made the music ideal for repetition before the fiddler moved on to a different dance tune altogether. Hornpipes (2/4 or 4/4 meter) feature a somewhat slower tempo than reels, and "have a more pronounced accent on the first and third beats."<sup>49</sup> Arpeggiation and triadic motion are central to the melody here. Cadences in hornpipes often fall on the downbeat of a section's last measure with three eighth or quarter notes (see Plate 5, *Sailor's Hornpipe*), thus

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<sup>47</sup> Broyles, "Immigrant, Folk, and Regional Musics," 143.

<sup>48</sup> Broyles, "Immigrant, Folk, and Regional Musics," 143.

<sup>49</sup> Broyles, "Immigrant, Folk, and Regional Musics," 143.

investing the music with more final closure than the last cadence in a reel.

Typically, two or more dance tunes of the same or different type were strung together and played in succession. Their repetition provided opportunities for the fiddler to ornament the music differently each time through. In order to be heard across the dance floor or the wooden surface on a flatboat over the shuffling of feet and kicking heels, fiddlers had to play these dance tunes at an aggressive volume. The physical energy and the rhythmical drive involved in this activity are undoubtedly present in the music-making Bingham portrayed in *The Jolly Flatboatmen*.

The fusion of two cultures exemplified in the introduction and assimilation of Irish music and dance in the United States offers a better understanding of how Bingham and Mount came to observe the ingredients of a folkloric tradition that unfolded in America during the first half of the nineteenth-century. Irish musicians settled in different areas throughout the United States, and spread and preserved their musical heritage under different conditions. Their music thus came to incorporate a diversity of stylistic traits reflecting the variety of provincial, regional, and local styles that were in the process of evolving in different performance venues.

A close examination of the position of the fiddler and his instrument in the three *Jolly Flatboatmen* shows that Bingham, as he intensively studied the realization of human figures in his sketches, became a more experienced painter of the postures and

positions relevant to the models in his artwork.<sup>50</sup> The 1846 version shows a fiddler using a relatively long bow that is placed on the strings in an unusual angle as well as a fiddle that rests on his shoulder neither naturally nor too securely (see Plate 6). It becomes clear how eagerly Bingham worked on achieving a correct position of the fiddle and the bow in perspective. In contrast, the sketches for the later two versions of *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (see Plate 7) speak for the artist's increased understanding of how a fiddle is held and bowed.

Ethnographic authenticity underlies Bingham's drawings of both the fiddler and the figure playing the skillet. In contrast to the borrowed image of the central dancing figure, the sketches attest to the artist's serious study in an effort to depict the musicians' playing positions as convincingly as possible. It is the fiddler and the skillet player that document performance traditions of nineteenth-century folk music in the American West. Depending on the availability of percussion instruments, the rhythm could be provided by a variety of instruments, such as a round Bodhran drum made of dried animal skin and played with a wooden stick, or simply by a pair of animal bones that were held between two

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<sup>50</sup> *Bingham's Missouri* and more so McDermott, *George Caleb Bingham* reproduce a number of the artist's drawings that were preserved and published by the St. Louis Merchantile Library Association. Among others, the collection contains surviving sketches for six of the eight figures that Bingham portrayed in *The Jolly Flatboatmen* of 1846 and partly reused in 1857 and 1877/78. Today, the Bingham Sketchbook is owned by the People of Missouri and the Bingham Trust. Half of the drawings are located in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City and half in the Saint Louis Art Museum.

adjoining fingers in either one or both hands. Mount's *Dance of the Haymakers* tells us that percussive sounds could also be produced by two thin drumsticks being played against each other.

The fiddler in *The Jolly Flatboatmen at Port* (1857) shows a playing position and technique that strongly deviate from classical violin playing. Holding the bow adjacent to the frog instead of right on it was typical for country music fiddlers, and a tradition that has been preserved to this day. In fact, reels and jigs are commonly played with only a few inches of the bow. In both *The Jolly Flatboatmen* of 1857 and especially 1877/78, the musician's passion for fiddling is conveyed in a loose and more relaxed body posture. His right arm raised to lead the bow with ease, the fiddler is leaning to his left where the physical tone production takes place and to where the musician's mental focus has subsequently shifted. The brim of his hat has moved into the fiddler's face such that we are unable to see his eyes. The fingerboard of the fiddle is securely cradled in the palm of the player's left hand, a customary playing technique among fiddlers at the time.<sup>51</sup> Fiddle tunes comprised triads or larger intervals that could easily be played in the lower positions of the neck due to the tuning of the instrument.<sup>52</sup> If pitches of higher registers were

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<sup>51</sup> Mount's paintings with musical subject matters provide ample evidence for this technique. See the fiddlers in *Rustic Dance After a Sleigh Ride* (1830), *Dancing on the Barn Floor* (1831), *After Dinner* (1834), *Dance of the Haymakers* (1845), and in *Right and Left* (1850).

<sup>52</sup> There are always alternative ways to finger a tune on a fiddle. If preferred, the player can change fingerings that are mostly centered around the lower positions and, depending on the piece, move certain passages to higher positions in order to accommodate tone qualities such as vibrato for a more beautiful

needed, the fourth finger of the left hand was still flexible enough to reach up to a higher position in contrast to virtuosic violin playing that requires the entire left hand to be positioned loosely and flexible such that a fast control over all positions could successfully be executed at all times. The fiddler and the pan player, then, represent convincing figures in Bingham's *Jolly Flatboatmen*. They embody the spirit of the music provided by the two instruments. The relative stiffness and frontal presentation of the dancer in the 1846 version is set apart from the natural and relaxed postures of the two musicians. As McDermott has remarked "Bingham seems to have studied their character very closely, with the eye and genius of an artist and the mind of a philosopher. He has seized the characteristic points, and gathered up their expressive features, and transferred them to his canvas with a truthfulness that strikes every observer."<sup>53</sup> The fiddler and the skillet player best convey authentic views of nineteenth-century American boatmen on western rivers and imbue the painting with documentary status.

Scholars seeking to rescue Bingham from oblivion have referred to him as the "Missouri artist."<sup>54</sup> His river portraits account for the fact that

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tone. However, keeping up with the rhythmic drive of faster tunes for square dances, the tempo does not allow much time and does not intend for the music to be played in a virtuosic manner: "The ultimate test here is not expertise in playing elegant grace notes or fancy tunes, but in providing a solid 'danceable' musical framework for the people out front." (Marshall, "Place of Traditional Fiddling," 44.)

<sup>53</sup> McDermott, "George Caleb Bingham," 62.

<sup>54</sup> See Childs, "George Caleb Bingham," 595-98; Helen R. Parsons, "Missouri's Greatest Painter: George Caleb Bingham,"

Missouri was the place where Bingham created a record of the history of a region in which traditional music playing was an activity tightly interwoven into the concept of frontier life. William H. Truettner has argued that even though these paintings “may *look* like factual transcriptions of people, events, and landscapes that artists sometimes encountered on western travels, . . . they were actually designed to make viewers believe in the concepts of national expansionism and the frontier heritage of America. [original italics]”<sup>55</sup> It is certainly true that Bingham’s river scenes stand for the artist’s advocacy for civilization and commerce in the West. The painter has inscribed these ideas *The Jolly Flatboatmen* by depicting scenes on rivers that functioned as important political and economic connections between America’s East and West. However, we must not underestimate how Bingham through real-life observation and deep familiarization with the activities of his subject matters has come to document music and dance on the frontier as a cultural phenomenon which shaped a folklore in the nineteenth-century that was just as truly and typically American.

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*Kansas City Public Library Quarterly* 1 (July 1901): 65-68; Shapiro, “George Caleb Bingham,” 143-50; and Simonds, “A Pioneer Painter,” 71.

<sup>55</sup> Truettner, “Reinterpreting Images,” 542.

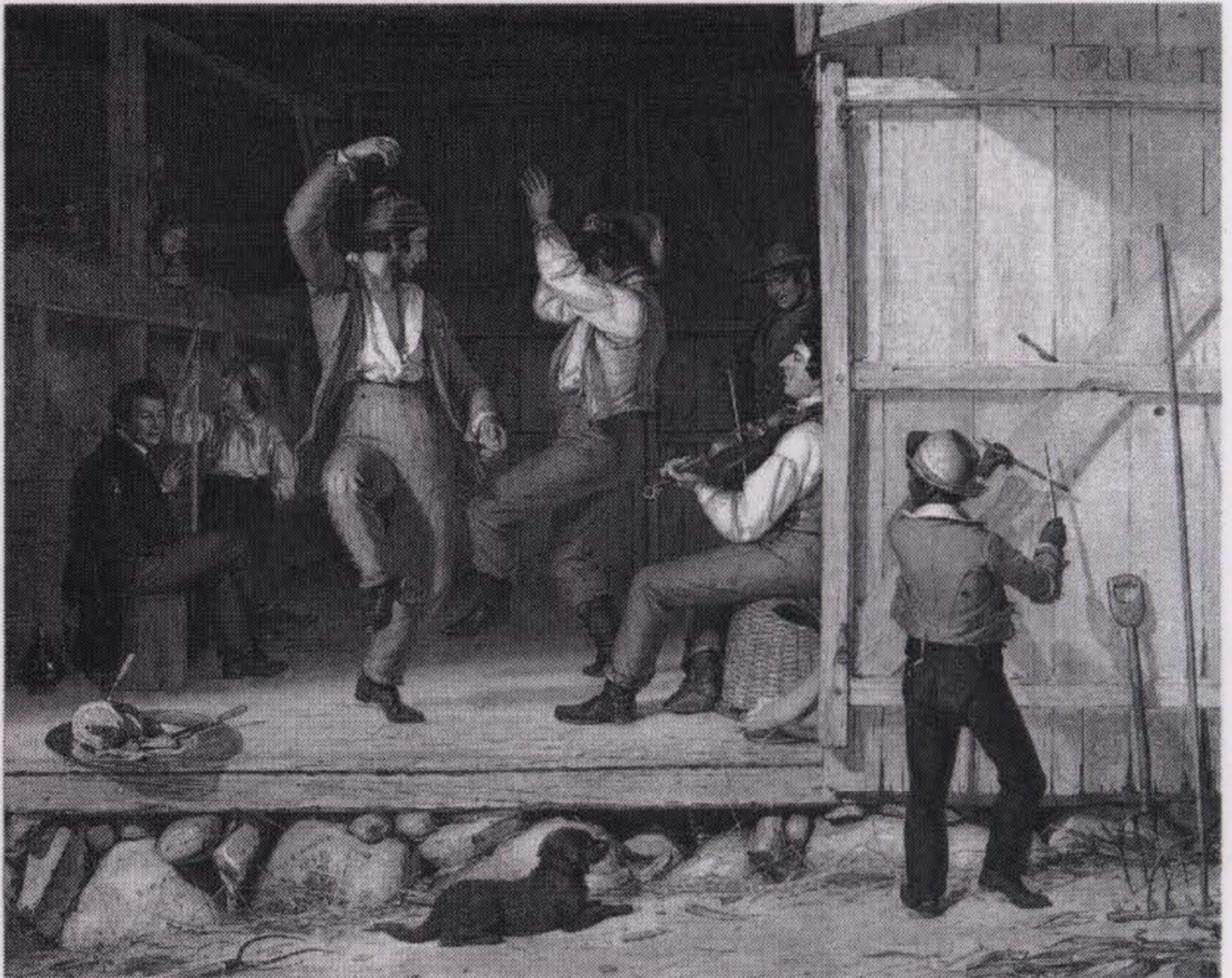
## Plate 1

George Caleb Bingham, *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, 1846. Oil on canvas, 38½ by 48½ inches. The Manoogian Collection, on loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Image © 2004 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.



**Plate 2**

William Sidney Mount, *Dance of the Haymakers*, 1845. Oil on canvas, 24½ by 29 7/8 inches. The Long Island Museum of American Art, History & Carriages, Stony Brook, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ward Melville, 1950. Photography courtesy of The Long Island Museum.



**Plate 3**

George Caleb Bingham, *The Jolly Flatboatmen in Port*, 1857. Oil on canvas, 47 1/16 by 69 5/8 inches. The Saint Louis Art Museum. Museum Purchase. Photography courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.



**Plate 4**

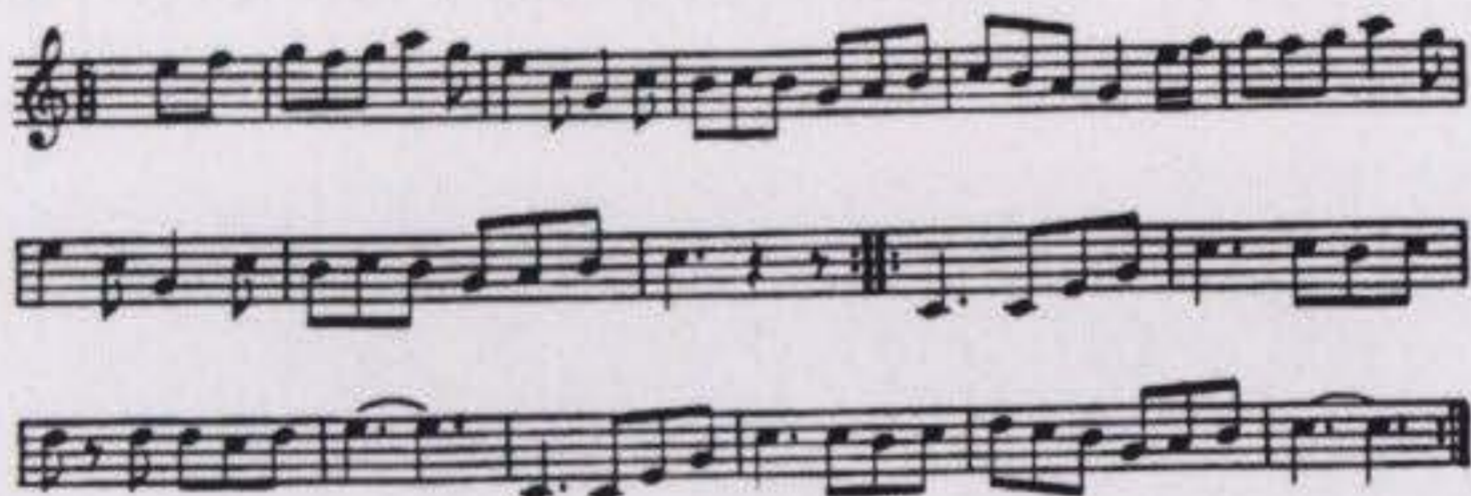
George Caleb Bingham, *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, 1877/78. Oil on canvas, 26 1/16 by 36 3/8 inches. Terra Foundation for the Arts, Daniel J. Terra Collection, Chicago, 1992.15. Photography courtesy of Terra Foundation for the Arts.



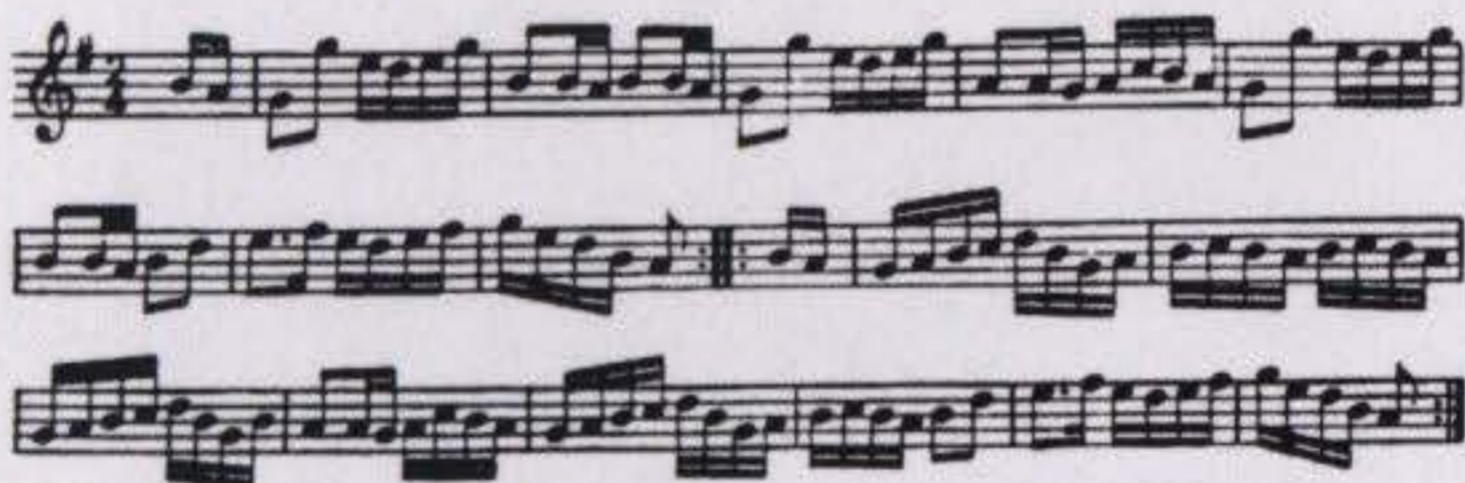
## Plate 5

*Across the River*, *McLeod's Reel*, *Tennessee Reel*, and *Sailor's Hornpipe*.  
Ira W. Ford, *Traditional Music of America* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1940), pp. 49, 31, 90, and 46, respectively.

### ACROSS THE RIVER



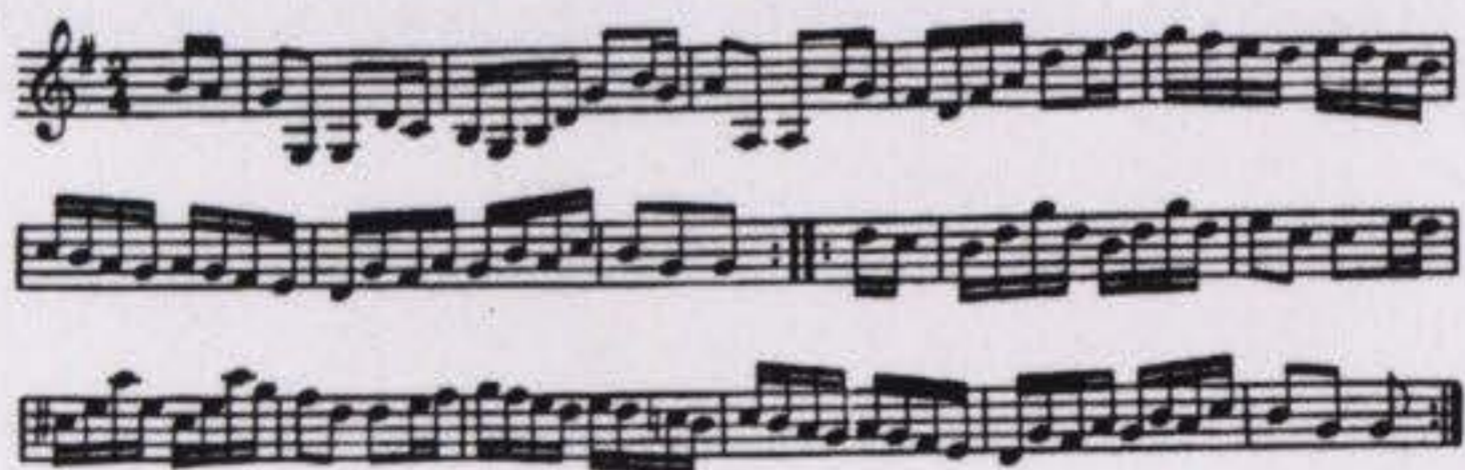
### McLEOD'S REEL



### TENNESSEE REEL



### SAILOR'S HORNPIPE



**Plate 6**

George Caleb Bingham, *Fiddler (nato)*. Black India Ink, Wash, Pencil on Rag Paper, 20 3/4 by 16 inches. Lent by the People of Missouri. Acquired Through the Generosity of the Louis D. Beaumont Foundation. 8-1977/3. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri.



**Plate 7**

George Caleb Bingham, *Fiddler (2)*, 1857. Brush, Ink and Wash over Pencil, heightened with gouache, 15 1/8 by 11 3/4 inches. Lent by the People of Missouri. Gift of the Arts and Education Council of Greater St. Louis. Photography courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, Missouri.



## Abstract

At first sight, the painting *The Jolly Flatboatmen* appears to depict life on the river in the American West. Upon closer reading, Bingham (1811-79) presents a record of the history of a region here in which music-making was an activity tightly woven into the concept of frontier life - a recurring subject matter which the artist observed frequently in reality. The 1846 version shows eight boatmen on a flat raft, two of which are playing music and the central figure engaged in a dance. Art historians have placed this work in historical and political contexts. While it has been valuable to interpret it as Bingham's personal expression of nationalism in the age of westward expansion, the documenting of nineteenth-century American folklore in *The Jolly Flatboatmen* deserves more attention from a musicological point of view. As the only paintings showing music and dance, the three versions of *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1846, 1857, 1877/78) stand out in the artist's overall output. By treating this theme repeatedly, Bingham conveys that these events were not just a pastime but that they defined musical folklore in the West.

This article examines how Bingham's *Jolly Flatboatmen* creates an authentic visual account of music-making in America's frontier. Drawing upon iconographical analysis, this study explores what kind of music and dance may have been represented here and casts light on the socio-cultural context for a musical practice that contributed to the shaping of musical traditions in nineteenth-century America