

Flatpick Profile: Max Newman

by Dan Miller

Dating back to the time of the early settlers, fiddle music in America was often played for dancers who brought traditional dances to the new world from their native countries. Among these are contra dances and square dances, whose roots trace back to England and France. Through the years, these dance forms have remained alive and continued to evolve. Contra dances, in particular, are more popular than ever. Groups can be found in every part of the United States and Canada, with regularly scheduled events where musicians play, callers call, and dancers kick up their heels. Many of these events feature local musical talent, but there are also opportunities for touring contra dance bands to play for their dancers. One of the most popular of the touring contra dance bands is the New England band Stringrays.

While it is not unusual to find bluegrass guitar players occasionally sitting in with contra dance bands, Stringrays guitar player, Max Newman, is not a bluegrass player who is moonlighting with a contra dance band. Max is primarily a contra dance guitarist and has been playing at contra dances since he was in his early teens. Since what Max does is closely related to the fiddle music played in bluegrass, old-time, and Irish bands, I thought it would be interesting for our readers to learn about Max and take a look at fiddle tune guitar playing from Max's perspective of primarily playing for dancers.

Max was born in Fairbanks, Alaska, and began learning how to play the bagpipes at the age of 5. His father played guitar in a local Irish music band called Celtic Confusion, which played for Irish-themed events and contra dances. By the time Max was eleven he had given up on the bagpipes and had begun learning how to play the piano and the guitar, taking the opportunity to make music with his father. He said, "There was a weekly Irish session at an old log cabin that had been converted into a bookstore and coffee house. In the dead

of winter, the musicians would gather around the wood stove and play. I went with my father and would sit in the corner, listening. I eventually learned enough on piano and guitar that I could sit in with them." Around this same time, he also began dancing at the local contra dance and was soon playing for them as well.

Max said that his father was a big influence, both directly as a musician as well as for exposing him to other live music, including touring musicians such as Irish guitarist John Doyle and the David Grisman Quintet. "And the touring musicians would often end up at that log cabin coffee house, where we'd have a chance to play some tunes and rub shoulders with them," Max added.

He also pointed to Mike Mickelson of the Alaska-based bluegrass band Bearfoot as an influence. Max said, "I went through a bluegrass period and watching Mike play showed me that an Alaskan could be just as excellent as anyone from the Lower 48. There they were, having their album produced by Todd Phillips and sounding great. Bluegrass is a big thing in Alaska. During the summer in Alaska there's a circuit of great bluegrass and folk festivals. I had the opportunity to listen to and jam with a lot of bluegrass and old-time musicians. You can imagine how late a jam can go in the Land of the Midnight Sun. Heading to the festivals was an important part of every summer. Musicians from different genres of music were interacting and playing music together and that opened my ears."

Max played in his father's band until he left Alaska to attend college at Harvard in 2003. Once in New England, Max found himself in the homeland of contra dancing. He continued to play music and attend the



local contra dances. He even revived the square dance at Harvard that had been big in the 1940s and 50s. Shortly after graduating in 2007, he formed the contra dance band Nor'easter, where he plays some guitar, but primarily plays mandolin. He found his chance to shine on the guitar around 2012 when he started accompanying New England fiddle legend Rodney Miller with bass/banjo player Stuart Kenney, in the band Stringrays.

Traditional contra bands typically featured the piano as the back up instrument and fiddle as the lead instrument. "There was a time," Max said, "twenty-five to thirty years ago that not having a piano at a contra dance was unthinkable. But, thanks to guitar players like Larry Unger and Russ Barenberg, guitar is now employed just as much as, if not more than, the piano." Guitar players eventually slipped into contra dance groups, where the guitarist was usually considered part of the rhythm section. In his bands, Max takes the opportunity to play lead more than most contra dance band guitar players. When we started learning how to play the guitar he was interested in learning both rhythm and lead, one of the reasons he also plays mandolin. He said, "I was interested in playing melodies and understanding the relationship between chords and melody."

In Irish music, guitar players execute chordal improvisation in their back up. Max said, "My back up is inspired by the melodies. When you are playing for dancers there is a lot of opportunity to experiment. You are open to try new things and go to different places. Plus, if you make a mistake when you are playing for dancers it is immediately forgotten. Their connection with the music is more intuitive than it is cerebral."

When asked how he approaches chordal improvisation, Max said, "At any given time, I have a pretty good idea of what notes are in the melody and how they relate to the chords I am playing. But ultimately I go with what feels right. The dancers will inspire musical ideas. A lot of the chord improvisation is bass-line centered. I think a lot about harmonizing bass lines." Rhythmically, Max said that a lot of the emphasis is connected to the lifting up and setting down of the dancer's feet and the way the dancers are moving. He said, "There is a variety of rhythmic emphasis. A dance has a percussive vibe, with the shuffling and stomping of the dancer's feet. Sometimes I drive by pushing ahead of the beat. Sometimes I'm pulling back. It's about playing with the dancers. Letting them know you are there with them."

Max's approach to rhythm also differs depending on the band. He said, "Nor'easter is more of an Irish-influenced contra dance band. With that band I will usually play a smooth, even, and strummy rhythm. With Stringrays I play more of a closed chord, boom-chuck style rhythm, which supports Rodney Miller's fiddle playing. Rodney is

known as 'Mr. New England fiddler,' but he can also play southern style old-time fiddle and he plays the swingiest, most lyrical solos. He has been a major influence in the contra dance world and has helped open up the dances to a variety of music. I listened to Rodney's fiddling when I was growing up and he was a big influence for me. Playing with him now is a treat."

Regarding his contra dance guitar influences, Max said, "There aren't too many of us that play a lot of leads on the guitar at contra dances." He cited David Surette, who played with Rodney Miller in the band Airdance. "His playing somehow embodies both variety and a consistent style... and such tasteful solos." Elixir's Owen Morrison is another influence. "At 31 years old, he is relatively more my contemporary. But, Owen's got great tone, great rhythm, and he plays a rippling tight guitar lead." Some of Max's other guitar influences include Tony Rice, Norman Blake, and John Doyle.

Max travels to play for contra and square dances almost every weekend. The band plays for evenings that usually last three hours. Each set of tunes lasts an average of ten minutes. A lot of physical stamina is required for this type of playing and Max said that it was necessary for him to learn how to stay relaxed, use efficient attack angles, use larger muscle groups, and play with an overall economy of motion. He said, "In addition to long sets, there are also challenging aspects to the sound. A room full of dancers can be very loud. Not an ideal sound situation. Some players will try to compensate by playing harder, but that

can cause fatigue. So you have to learn how to relax and play ergonomically."

Max's guitar is a left-handed Collings D2H. He said, "As a lefty, I don't really get to compare guitars all that easily, but the Collings suits my needs." When asked about his gear, Max said, "I use a purple 1.14mm Dunlop Tortex for the flatpicking and boom-chucking Stringrays stuff. It's got enough firmness and tone for leads, while being nimble enough for playing strummier backup. That quality is especially necessary for jigs. I use a floppy grey .60mm Dunlop nylon for the Irish-inspired stuff I do with Nor'easter. In lieu of a mic, I've been using the L.R. Baggs Anthem (part mic and part pickup) in my guitar. It gives essentially no feedback problems and a tight, natural sound. I'm pretty happy with it at the moment. I generally use medium strings, but I am constantly experimenting."

Max feels fortunate to play with bands that allow him space to stretch out and play lead. He said that sometimes he and Rodney will double a lead, sometimes they will exchange solos, and sometimes they will trade four bar phrases. He said, "Rodney is inspiringly improvisational, which causes me to up my game." Max said that contra dancers appreciate variety, so he gets the chance to play everything from New England fiddle music, to southern fiddle music, to Gypsy, to Irish, to jungle beat funk. The one thing that Max will always keep in mind when soloing is that "every note that you are playing has to serve the dance. When you get that right, the reward is a hall filled with people connected to the music you are making and with each other."

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It can be pretty amazing.”

When asked about the differences between contra dances and square dances, Max explained that historically the square dance started as the French quadrille, while the contra dances originated in England and were called “country dances.” At some point in time, the English country dances were introduced in France, where the French called them contra-dances or contredanses. Over time these dances returned to England and then made their way to the America and became popular in the Northeastern part of the United States.

The contra dance stayed isolated in New England for some time because after the American Revolutionary War the French were more popular in America and thus the French quadrille, or “square dance” became more wide spread in the U.S. Contra dance saw a revival in the 1970s and today both contra dances and square dances are popular throughout the country. Contra dances and square dances both feature callers and they share a number of steps. At a square dance, the caller often improvises the moves and the dancers wait to hear the next move from the caller. In a contra dance, however, the dance sequence repeats with every repetition of the tune. The caller will lead the dancers through the steps, but once the dancers start remembering the sequence, they require less direction from the caller. This allows the dancers to interact more with the music and the musicians.

From a musician’s perspective, Max explains that playing for each kind of dance is different. With a square dance the caller is in charge. The band is there to support the caller and the musicians give the caller room to command the dancers’ attention. Max said, “When you are playing for a square dance, the music is a lot less phrased. You will play smoother through each eight bar phrase because you don’t know if the caller is going to call on or off phrase. There’s a more even groove with less drama in the music because you don’t want to distract from the caller. The interaction at a square dance is between the caller and the dancers. In a contra dance, there is more interaction between the dancers and the musicians. There is a greater latitude for variety and experimentation. Each style is fun, challenging, and rewarding.”

On this issue’s companion audio CD you will hear a selection from the Stringrays’ self-titled CD. The selection is a medley of two old-time tunes, “Maysville” and “Estill Bingham’s.” In reference to these tunes,

the CDs liner notes state, “ ‘Maysville’ was recorded by J.P. Fraley (1923-2011) and seems to have come to him from his father. John Hartford said it was played while hauling tobacco to Maysville, Kentucky. The second tune comes from the repertoire of Estill Bingham (1899-1990), fiddler from Bell County, Kentucky. At times he reputedly tuned his fiddle down a step or two, which might account for the key we play it in.” On the pages that follow, Max has tabbed out the melody for “Maysville.”

If you are a fiddle tune flatpicker and want to learn how to add new life to your picking, I highly recommend that you seek out the opportunity to play for dancers. There is a big difference between playing for a listening audience (as in bluegrass or folk music) and playing for dancers (as in Irish, old-time, contra, and square dance music). When you play for dancers, you have learn how to play so that the dancers will be inspired to move their feet. Rhythm and groove become the most important elements of your music and that shift can really help change your playing for the better.

If you’ve never been to a contra dance, do yourself a favor and give it a try. It is a lot of fun! If the Stringrays are playing, all the better. You can learn more about the Stringrays and check out their schedule on their web site: <http://stringraymusic.com>.



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Maysville

Arranged by Max Newman

1 C F

6 C F C F G C

10 C F

14 C F C F G C

18 F C F C Am

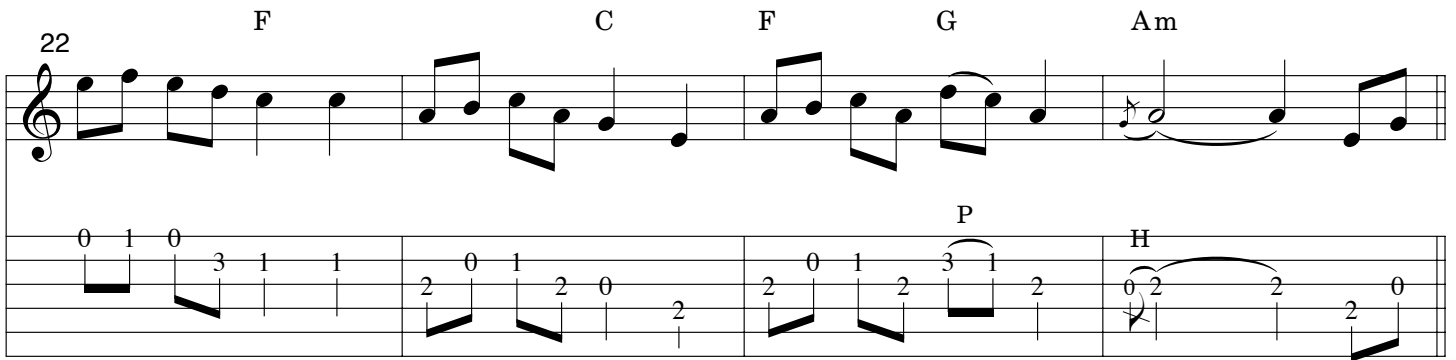
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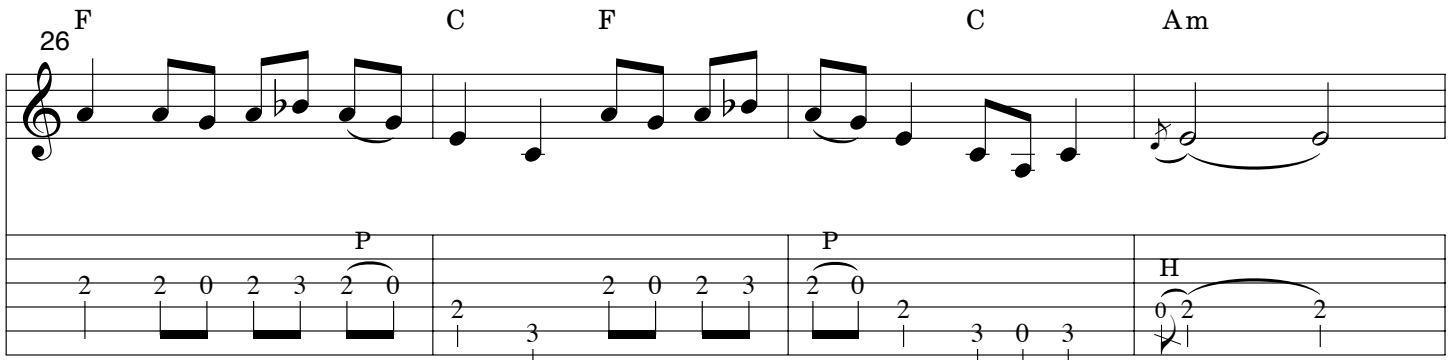
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Maysville (con't)

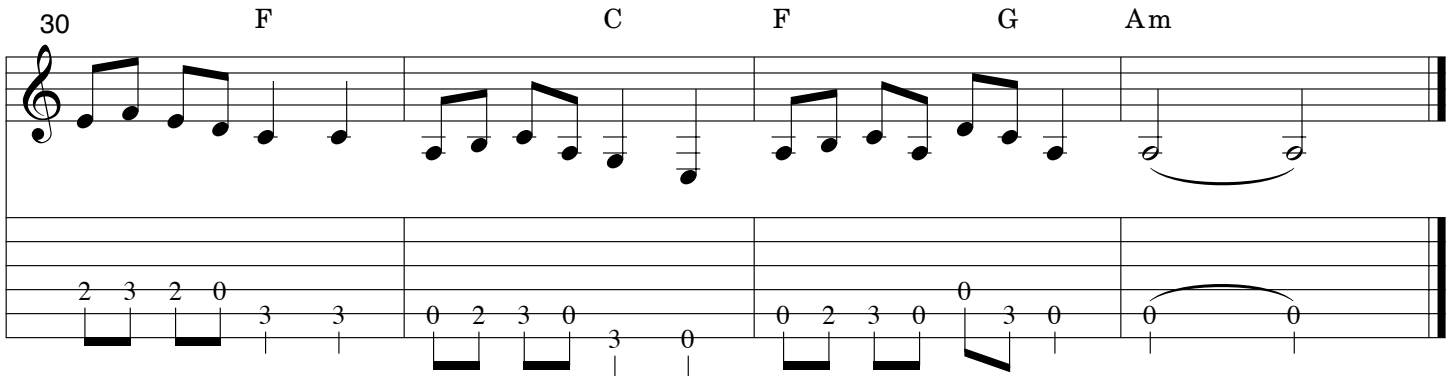
22 F C F G Am



26 F C F C Am



30 F C F G Am



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