

On the Study of Fiddle Tunes

*Reassurance that there is no frivolous design
behind this seemingly "goofy" maneuver*

By John Hartford

I made a CD of tunes that I was sure Ed Haley played but I never actually heard him play, some of which were acknowledged directly in interviews and some from old lists of tunes that were popular in his locality during his time period. Ugee (Hicks) Postalwait clearly remembered a piece called "Wild Hog in the Red Brush," a title I immediately fell in love with and began to hunt for. I guess I really wanted it to be some really crooked old air with lots of parts, but I found a Sherman Lawson version of it on a reissue of Frank Hutchinson and it turned out to be no more than "Uncle Joe," or "Have You Ever Seen the Devil, Uncle Joe?" (a tune we all know and have worn out), and Frank Hutchinson and Sherman Lawson were both from Logan County, West Virginia, where Ed grew up. So I let it go at that but I couldn't shake that title.

Then Kentucky fiddle tune collector extraordinaire John Harrod came up with a Harold Stamper recording of his father Amyx Stamper (in the John Harrod, Gus Meade Archive) with just what I had dreamed of, a beautiful old "modal," crooked, four-part tune in G called "Wild Hog in the Red Brush." I woodshedded the hell out of it and was sure it was the one that Ed played, and it may be. (He was reputed to have known thousands of melodies.)

Anyhow, I cut it as the title tune of this CD I was telling you about and Ugee Postalwait said she really couldn't remember much more about it than the title. So we went on ahead, sorta thinking that was it and so then a year or two and another album, and then this past January, Mike Seeger

and I do a project in California with David Grisman and get to talking about fiddling and Mike tells me he has a taped interview with Sherman Lawson where he mentions Ed Haley. He goes home and sends it to me and low and behold, Sherman not only mentions Ed Haley but proceeds to tell what a profound influence he was and plays Ed's version of "Blackberry Blossom" ("Garfield's"), not note perfect or metrically identical, but close enough to know that he at one time studied Ed. At the time the tape was made, it was clear that he hadn't played much in the recent years before the interview, but it hit me then and there that Ed probably played "Uncle Joe" for "Wild Hog." That's not to say he didn't play the four-part tune and call it something else, but I now believe that my original assumption based on wishful thinking was probably wrong.

So why in the world would someone want to know what fiddle tune is what fiddle tune and where it was played and by whom and all that sort of stuff? And waste a lot of time studying about it? This is an occupation that has gone on for centuries by people who had no idea why they did it. There is the story of the old man on his death bed sending his son to town to find a certain piper to play for him, one more time, a certain part of a certain tune so that he might carry it to his grave.

What good is it to know that the ancestral name of "Uncle Joe" ("Have You Ever Seen the Devil, Uncle Joe?" or "Hop Light Ladies the Cake's All Dough") is "Miss McCloud's Reel," and if the truth were known, it probably has other names, some written down or recorded, and others

Uncle Joe

(For the record)

The image displays the musical notation for the fiddle tune "Uncle Joe". It is written on a single treble clef staff in the key of G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. The notation is divided into four systems, with measure numbers 1, 6, 10, and 15 indicated at the beginning of each system. The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplet-like patterns. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

"...[There are] a many great tunes that if you goof and play one or two notes different or out of place, the melody either becomes something else or just falls apart and crumbles into a little twisted pile of note heads and stems."

taken to the cemetery by some old fiddler. Actually, it seems that every title has many melodies and every melody has many titles and I say "seems" 'cause now at the age of sixty-one (and more knowledgeable than I was when I was in my teens and regarded myself as bullet proof), I'm even less sure of any information than I once was.

Now for me, the coordinates of the existence of a tune is that a certain order of notes and rhythm has been played on a certain date by a certain person and given a certain title, or even that someone *said* that a certain person played a certain tune on a certain day and gave it a certain title (lots of times all you got to go on is rumor but it is better than nothing, and then even if that's all you can find out, then you at least know as much about it as I do). Of course, you know that if a certain person plays a certain tune on a certain date twice in a row that each version will be slightly different.

For years we've been plagued by the proposition of making a tune collection arranged in melodic order (like alphabetical order) so you could look up a tune by the melody instead of the title, but many have said it would be virtually impossible because of all the different notes in the different orders that you could use to express that melody. But I've started to model my study of tunes on the study of language and if you read about the origins of the dictionary and the struggles of Dr. Johnson, you start to see that melodic order needs to be "as written," the way words are arranged "as spelled," which means published or as notated in someone's notebook and dutifully acknowledged in the entry and nowadays in this computer age (don't you just love it?) you could type in a melody that you wanted to

identify and if you didn't find it exactly, it could then immediately become another entry telling what little you know, be it rumor or known event.

So Marie comes into the room with hot soup and says something like, "Who cares? What difference does it make? They all sound the same and they all have funny names. Get a life." She's got a point, and not only that but the number of people I can discuss it with I can almost count on my fingers. I'd be a whole lot better off collecting bottle caps. What appears on the surface to be a completely anachronistic study has in recent years after much reflection (you don't want to know) taken on more ominous ramifications, especially after my son learned me to read music and I started really digging into the tune books.

Dennis Trone and I had this discussion one time in the pilot house of the Julia Belle Swain, booming down the Illinois River, I think somewhere around Twin Sister's Islands above Henry, on a beautiful summer day and we were discussing the building of nineteenth century style steamboats for use in the latter part of the twentieth century and how you would know what to build inasmuch as several recently-built steamboats had turned out to be less than satisfactory for their owners. He said, "Well, why do you think we study all this old river history and collect pictures and specifications of all these old boats? (which is another seemingly useless life-time obsession of mine that for years I had been at a loss to explain). Like collecting and studying fiddle tunes, I had always done it purely for fun and nothing else, always knowing that there was absolutely no money in it whatsoever and even as I've heard several old musicians complain, "I've

Wild Hog in the Red Brush

My version of the Amyx Stamper version, from the John Harrod Collection. It may be a little more major than the way Amyx played it.

The image displays a musical score for the tune "Wild Hog in the Red Brush". The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 2/4. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins with a measure number '1' and contains the first six measures. The second staff begins with a measure number '7' and contains measures 7 through 12. The third staff begins with a measure number '13' and contains measures 13 through 18. The fourth staff begins with a measure number '19' and contains measures 19 through 24. The music is characterized by a steady eighth-note rhythm with various melodic intervals and some chromaticism.

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Sally Johnson



Katy Hill



Now really that's not much and I'll bet Lowe and Joe too, for that matter, would have had trouble playing it twice in a row note perfect alike. Gene Goforth used to say his daddy played (of course) "Wolves A Howlin'" (who doesn't?) but also played another tune called "The Howlin' Wolves," and Gene said he never could tell the difference but said his father swore up and down that he could.

Okay, here's a story for you. Ed Haley got in a contest one time at the old Paramount Theatre in Ashland and one of the rules of the contest was (as I think it was in a lot of contests in the thirties) that once a tune had been played it couldn't be repeated by another contestant. One of Ed's powerhouse tunes at the time, that was a sure winner, was his incredible version of "Cacklin' Hen," and wouldn't you know it, some old boy got up right before him and scraped through it. Sure Ed was mad, but he got up and played the "Hen" anyway and tore the place up and the puzzled judges asked him, "Well what the hell was that?" (They knew.) Ed said, "That was 'Little Brown Pullet,' and she cackles, too." I'm satisfied that there was a tremendous difference between the two versions anyway. (Ed played about ten parts.)

My feeling (and what I've just told you is about all I have to go on), is that "Sally Johnson" is such a good tune (especially in a contest) that in the twenties and thirties it needed another name so it could be repeated in a contest. I've heard it called "Sally Ann Johnson" and "Katherine Hill," and I'm sure you could give me some other names. Bruce Molsky tells me the old-timers around Galax call it "Piney Woods Gal." It's in *O'Neill's* as "My Love Is Fair and Handsome." Incidentally, Abraham Lincoln's father's second wife (after Abe's mother) was named Sally Johnson.

Now a question that almost shoots my theory in the head is that I don't know any "parallel" titles for "Sally Goodin," "Grey Eagle," "Wagoner," and "Billy in the Lowground." Maybe someone reading this magazine does. Anyhow, I like a melody I can remember easily and improvise on and have a good time with, and yet my poor head is full of crooked old airs that would put anyone to sleep. I'm pretty good at emptying a room with them. Marie says I could be a real pro if I would learn when to quit. She says at a jam session, I'm the first to pick it up and the last to lay it down. I think I'll go call Art Stamper and then go to bed.

By the way, I just found a note that said that Ed Haley also called "Wild Hog in the Red Brush" "Harry in the Wild Wood." I don't know where I got the note and I don't know which of the two melodies he was referring to. Sounds like something Wilson Douglas might have told me....

[John Hartford has been a professional fiddler, banjo player and songwriter for over thirty years. His instructional video, "John Hartford's Old-Time Fiddling" is available from Fiddler Magazine (see page 66). For more info, see John's website at <http://www.techpublishing.com/hartford/>]

lost a many a good crop a fooling with an old fiddle." If you study your steamboat history, you will immediately find that a lot of the research has been done on down through the years. A certain river demands a boat of a certain length to be ideal as to what its job is: passengers, freight, or both. There is an ideal engine size and you can look at the length and quality of a boat's service to see if that combination of elements was successful. The study of fiddle tunes is really the study of one of the all-time mysteries of the universe. The study of why one melody is more popular than another, why one will hang around longer than another and why two melodies that both seem adequate will be entirely unequal in this regard.

And a lot of the research has been done. No kidding, a feller could make a lot of money if he knew this secret and there are musicians out there who (dang their hides) create as if they do! A crazy melody with weird bar structure and a strange progression of notes like "Down Yonder" can be one of the most popular melodies of all times, inspiring at the same time reverential love and pure hatred in the fiddlers who play it. At the same time, *Ryan's Mammoth Collection* has a great many tunes that if you goof and play one or two notes different or out of place the melody either becomes something else or just falls apart and crumbles into a little twisted pile of note heads and stems. Other tunes like "Sally Goodin" (which for some reason has always pretty well been known by that one name) can be played out of tune on the worse kind of instrument by the drunkest of players in the sorriest of meter and it still comes out "Sally Goodin." I think of that as being an "ironclad" tune and whoever wrote that wrote the hell out of it. One of life's mysterious musical equations.

Here's a theory of mine, a little off the subject, but maybe not really. For all good intentions, "Sally Johnson" and "Katy Hill" are the same tune, although Joe Stewart used to argue that they weren't, especially the way it was explained to him by Lowe Stokes.